

Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy

Discussion Paper Series

#R-33, June 2009

Changes in Media Polling in Recent Presidential Campaigns: Moving from Good to “Average” at CNN

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Joan Shorenstein Center
PRESS • POLITICS



• PUBLIC POLICY •

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This essay was prepared during a fellowship semester in Spring 2009 at the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University. I am grateful to the Center for financial support and to the University of Michigan for released time to work on this project. The work presented here has benefited from the research assistance of Mary Ellen Smith, for which I am grateful.

Introduction

Political coverage generally, and campaign coverage in particular, form a central part of the news in the United States. One reason is the important role of elections in our democratic system of governance, a combination of our belief in the representation function of elections and that the outcomes make a difference in which policies are pursued and implemented. Just as importantly, the coverage of elections has many features that appeal to journalists and editors. Elections occur on a fixed schedule, known well in advance; this enables planning for the allocation of resources to the coverage. They involve conflict between the competing campaigns, another highly valued element of newsworthiness. They have events and circumstances that change everyday. They have a relatively orderly progression to a definitive conclusion on Election Day so the coverage is bounded and focused on the outcome; and there is a clear winner and loser at the end, even though in the cases of Bush v. Gore or Coleman versus Franken it may take an unusually long period of time and legal activity in order to determine the actual winner. And the campaigns are populated by relatively willing sources who are happy to be quoted, on or off the record as the situation warrants. So there is a commonly understood narrative that allows news organizations to produce content in a relatively condensed form that is easily understood by their audience members. And the coverage can be produced economically and on schedule, with generally good planning of both the coverage and the allocation of necessary resources.

News organizations have a long standing interest in public opinion, dating by some accounts back into the early 19th Century. (Fenton, 1960; Frankovic, 1998; Herbst, 1993 & 1995) Over the years, and certainly since the election of 1948, there have been a series of trends that resulted in very stylized poll-based coverage of contemporary elections, nowhere more visibly than in presidential elections. While most news can be characterized as event driven, and one of the definitions of what is “news” consists of things (or events) that occurred in the previous 24 hours, the style of campaign coverage has increasingly become focused on the strategy of the candidates and how it is implemented. This includes increased attention to the dynamics of the campaign and the relative standing of the candidates and how it changes as a result of the implementation of their strategy. This is generally encapsulated in the notion of “horserace coverage” that is epitomized by a focus on who is ahead or behind and how that status changes. (Patterson, 1993 & 2005)

A new phenomenon that has appeared to help television news operations, as well as some web sites, to refresh their poll-based coverage with some frequency is the use of a “poll of polls,” an average of other organizations’ recent data rather than new information gathered by the news organization itself. But a poll of polls is not a substitute for a real survey. By definition, it can

only be used to describe opinions or attitudes about concepts on which there is a generally accepted common question wording and a common set of response categories. That is why it has been limited to analysis of candidate standings based upon a relatively standardized trial heat question. But the use of an average standing reported almost daily only supports the media's worst tendencies to employ horse race coverage that focuses on the dynamics and strategy of the campaign. The use of this device amplifies the worst tendencies of news organizations which provide contemporary campaign coverage.

The Early History of Media Polling

For more than 70 years, polling has maintained a central role in the political coverage produced by major news organizations in the United States, although the historical antecedents for collecting information about public opinion appeared at the beginning of the 19th century. We date the advent of the modern polling era to the election of 1936 when George Gallup struck an arrangement with *The Washington Post* whereby he guaranteed that he could produce a better estimate of the outcome of that presidential election than *The Literary Digest*, a magazine that was home to the most visible polling operation of its kind at the time. Gallup bet on his use of more scientific methods, particularly with regard to sampling that would produce better estimates for an electorate embedded in a Depression, because he could improve upon the *Digest's* use of mailing lists derived from those who owned telephones and cars as well subscriptions to their magazine. But he also counted on the fact that producing a good estimate with a major media partner would boost the visibility of his new polling firm and produce many new commercial clients from which he could profit.

In fact the early history of public opinion polling involved a series of partnerships between the major pollsters and news organizations that would publicize their work through the wide dissemination of their results. The three horsemen who established the new business of media polling in the 1930's — Archibald Crossley, George Gallup, and Elmo Roper — shared many things in common.¹ First and foremost, they had a background and training in market research, although it varied in terms of formal instruction. And each of them knew that a relationship with a major media organization or outlet was important for the development of the new businesses that each wanted to develop. Crossley actually started his career in the market research division of *The Literary Digest*, but he eventually developed a polling operation to produce content for the Hearst newspapers in 1936. Roper started a marketing research firm with partners and eventually did consumer surveys for *Fortune* magazine.

Gallup's background and entry was the most interesting because he began with a specific interest in journalism, parlayed his early work into a position as research director at Young and Rubicam, and then entered the public polling business with a big splash during the 1936 election. He had the most formal education in research methods, completing a Ph.D. in applied psychology at the State University of Iowa with the financial backing of Gardner Cowles, Jr., the newspaper publisher. After taking some early academic positions, he turned to market research at the advertising firm, and he eventually started the Gallup Poll through the American Institute for Public Opinion (AIPO). In going public through his relationship with *The Washington Post*, he not only offered his money back guarantee but also predicted where *The Literary Digest* would go wrong and by how much.

So from the very beginning, there has been a symbiotic relationship between pollsters and journalists. Polling data contribute in a straightforward and direct way to long standing campaign coverage patterns that news organizations were developing. In return, pollsters receive essentially free advertising for their political and public opinion work that enabled them to attract and maintain commercial clients interested in their marketing research services. The pollsters were interested in relatively permanent relationships with their news clients, and each developed a slightly different form of data collection and dissemination to suit their mutual interests. In the case of the Gallup Organization, they employed a field staff of interviewers all across the nation, and they mailed them packets of questionnaires about once a month. In the early period, the interviewers employed quota sampling techniques within sampled geographical areas and mailed their completed questionnaires back to Princeton, New Jersey for processing. AIPO produced two press releases a week for multiple weeks from each survey, authored by Dr. Gallup as a syndicated newspaper columnist and appearing in more than 200 newspapers by the 1950s. (Gollin, 1987) In this way, each questionnaire could be planned in terms of the press releases that could be generated from it and even in terms of the expected order of the stories that could be produced based upon their timeliness.

This model worked very well until a variety of economic and news making forces converged in a way that suggested large news organizations could do as good a job of data collection and analysis on their own and at a lower cost while gaining greater editorial control over the product. A combination of economic and technological trends in the 1970's moved news organizations from sponsors of polls to conductors of polls. (Crespi, 1980) The changes in technology manifest themselves in the availability of small personal computers (PC's) that could be linked with telephone lines to conduct the interviews; the fact that 94% of households had a telephone by then obviously contributed to this move. New software meant that the questionnaires could be programmed on the PC's so that interviewers read the questions off the computer screen and entered a respondent's answer through the keyboard. When the last

question was read and the answer entered, there was a complete data record for that respondent. And when the last interview was conducted, there was a complete dataset available for the entire sample. New software was also available to conduct analysis of the dataset in preparation for writing up the stories. The combination of the computer technology and the telephone meant that polls could be conducted more quickly with shorter field periods, thereby reducing the possibility that events in the real world — such as an international conflict, natural disaster, or a new campaign ad for example - would invalidate a poll because something changed sufficiently that the responses to the earliest interviews no longer had meaning.

And if these cost considerations were not enough, news organizations marshaled another set of justifications for going it on their own based upon newsworthiness criteria. Why should they have to rely upon decisions made by someone like Gallup about when events suggested that a poll should go into the field or which questions should be asked or what form the analysis should take?²² Weren't these more appropriately in the purview of editors and reporters who understood and could judge when planned coverage could be supplemented with polling data or events suggested that a new poll should be fielded? As the pace of news making quickened due to changing technology and the competition between television and print journalism, the perceived need to link polling with "breaking news" became an impetus for the news organizations' control of their own polling operations. And the increasing emphasis on journalistic "objectivity" further increased the value of polling in news making as a tool to achieve "precision journalism." (Meyer, 2002)

The early media-conducted polling efforts took a number of forms and developed in a number of well-documented ways. The first media polling unit was developed at CBS News, which soon thereafter collaborated with *The New York Times*. This was a journalistic marriage made in heaven as both organizations shared essentially the same deadline at 6 p.m. Television evening news got first crack at the content with an admittedly brief presentation on air while the next morning's newspaper got more space to devote to extended treatment and analysis. The two organizations designed their own surveys based upon their independent editorial judgments, which often converged; but they took advantage of the resources of each partner. In the beginning, this often included the availability of banks of telephones in the classified advertising operation of the newspapers that were available late in the day and evenings. Many other news organizations contracted out for polling services, while a few even established their own interviewing staffs. (Ismach, 1984)

Concerns about Media Polls

Some problems with the conduct of polls by news organizations in this period were identified early. (Kovach, 1980) One was the way that polling reinforced the horse-race tendencies in coverage of electoral campaigns. The use of sporting metaphors to cover politics in general, and campaigns in particular, contributed to a framing of the news in a way that focused on strategy and the dynamics of the contest more than the substance of the central campaign issues or comparisons between the candidates' various policies. (Patterson, 1994) This trend was heightened at the end of a campaign when tracking polls produced measurements of the candidates' standing based typically upon rolling three-day averages from interviews with small daily samples of likely voters. While a number of studies have documented the shifts in content (Welch, 2002) and their deleterious effects on the electorate (Capella and Jamieson, 1998; Jamieson, 1993; Valentino, Buhr, and Beckmann 2001), recent research suggests that the addition of poll results to this kind of coverage does not exacerbate these general coverage effects (Valentino, Buhr, and Beckmann 2001), although many researchers still argue to the contrary.

There were also concerns about the possibility that poll-based coverage was affecting the political process itself. Since the advent of media-conducted polls coincided with the design of a new system of primaries and caucuses instituted for the 1976 election that required interested presidential candidates to contest every event in order to secure pledged delegates at their party's nominating conventions, a set of forces were put in place that gave an important winnowing role to the media that formerly belonged to the political parties. And frequent measurements of the standing of the candidates in the polls contributed to journalists' assessments of their viability and electability. (Arterton, 1984; Bartels, 1988) This in turn affected the candidates' ability to raise money, secure volunteers and attract the most talented consultants and strategists. (Traugott, 1992)

As the appreciation for polling's contribution to news making grew within the industry, the use of polling began to proliferate. When cable television outlets expanded in number and increased their coverage of electoral politics, presidential campaigns and the current administration, their appetite for polling content grew accordingly. The number of cross-media partnerships also expanded to include all of the networks, and eventually they included local television stations and newspapers. As local media increasingly turned to polling to supplement their coverage with statewide and local samples rather than nationally representative samples of respondents, this increased level of polling got distributed among a growing number of firms. This trend was accelerated by the development of new technologies and methodologies that further reduced the cost of data collection. This also lowered the cost of entry into the field, and many pollsters "learned" their techniques by apprenticing at one firm and then leaving to start their own

business without any formal training in survey methods. At a lower geographical level, the same economic forces and imperatives were at work. A contract with a media client to do political polling still increased a firm's visibility and attracted new commercial clients.

More recently, economic pressures in the news business, especially among newspapers, have had their impact on polling operations. Some organizations like *The Los Angeles Times* eliminated their polling operations entirely. Others cut back on their polling budgets, reducing the number of polls they conducted either by frequency or length. These trends are more likely to be observed at smaller news outlets such as low circulation dailies or local television stations. But another manifestation of cost pressures is a turn to what many in the polling business consider to be less reliable and valid methods of data collection, including opt-in Internet panels and the use of interactive voice recognition (IVR) techniques whereby a computerized voice asks the questions and responses are recorded on a touch tone phone. In general, costs are saved by the use of shorter questionnaires, sometimes only three to five questions plus a short set of questions to collect demographic information for analysis and weighting purposes, and the use of less rigorous sampling methods. These might include interviewing anyone who answers the phone and generally eliminating within-household selection procedures.

Contemporary news organizations understand the utility of polling data to attract and maintain audiences, so they often resort to "opt in" data collection whereby they post a single question on their web site and invite visitors to register their opinions. These data have no scientific value at all as they reflect the opinions and responses of a self-selected set of participants.³ They are employed by news organizations that understand what real polls are as well as those that do not.⁴ The giveaway that these devices serve a purpose other than the collection of representative data is an acknowledgment on the web site that the data collection is not scientific.

Taking the current economic pressures on many news organizations into account, Rosensteil (2005: 700) has recently outlined six important trends that structure the way that polls are being used in contemporary media. He begins by acknowledging a series of changes in journalism — including cutbacks, an emphasis on repackaging secondhand material, and the demands of 24-hour news — that have expanded the reliance on polls as news, including polls of a sort once considered not reliable for publication. The manifestation of this trend has been a reduction in the vetting these polls are getting, which in turn has led to a more superficial understanding of the political race being covered. Secondly, there has been a proliferation of outlets offering news, resulting in a greater competition for audience, intensifying the motivation to use polls in part for their marketing value rather than purely for their probative journalistic value. Third, the more "synthetic" style of contemporary journalism has increased the tendency to allow

polls to create the dominant context by which journalists explain and organize other news — with reporting of who is ahead and behind becoming the lens through which reporters see and provide order to a more interpretive news environment. These trends are reinforced by a growing reliance in the press on reporting daily horse race tracking polls as news; the basic number of full-length poll-based news packages that an organization can report in a ten-week general election campaign is relatively fixed, but short daily stories on the horse race are guaranteed space.

The net effect of all of these factors, in turn, is to stymie the efforts of academic and commercial pollsters to maintain standards and deepen an understanding among journalists about public opinion research and how to use it in journalism. It is a debilitating influence on attempts to produce better data collections and more substantive journalism that could incorporate polling data to explain why the electorate is responding to the candidates and their campaigns in the way that they do rather than simply reporting on who is ahead and behind. In effect, these trends are preventing poll-based journalism from becoming what it could be — an enhanced form of reporting on politics that gives the electorate its own voice. In the “old days” of pre-polling journalism, reporters would turn to political elites and strategists for information about how the campaigns were developing. These actors provided information based upon their strategic interests that contained “spin” in a predictable direction that favored their candidate’s interests. The skillful use of good poll-based reporting could in theory provide a counterweight to those tendencies, but in practice current poll reporting has not yet reached its full potential to inform its audience members.

One final point to make concerns the seismic shift in the nature of election reporting that occurred during and after the 2000 presidential election. Prior to this election, the preponderance of coverage focused on a “national” race, and the polling was conducted accordingly. But the close outcome, the troubled coverage on election night that involved calls of individual states that were withdrawn and then called again for a different candidate, and hours of screens being covered with maps of the calls of the other states emblazoned in high contrast graphics imbued all subsequent coverage with the terminology of “red and blue states.”⁵ While this terminology is misused in many circumstances where it masks underlying divisions within a state’s population, it is appropriate when discussing the contest in the Electoral College where, in the vast majority of cases, the winner of the state’s popular vote gets all of its electoral votes. These “swing states” where the outcome was in doubt became the focus of the candidates’ allocation of their own time and resources, especially for their advertising dollars. And the polling emphasis shifted from a focus on national samples that reflected the relative standing of the candidates in what would be the popular vote to the use of

complementary statewide samples in what became known as the “battleground states” that could be more useful in projecting electoral votes.⁶

The Polling Aggregators

The web has had its impact on the presentation and analysis of public opinion data just as it has on news making. In the same way that news aggregation sites began to provide free access to information gathered from a number of web sites, often barely repackaged beyond the provision of a link to the original source, poll aggregators appeared on the web that summarized information from the latest data collected by others. These efforts began at the national level, but they quickly moved to the state-level as more and more polling information became available there, often based on IVR polls. Originally, their efforts involved the simple averaging of others’ polls, but by the 2008 campaign, the statistical manipulation of others’ poll results became more sophisticated. The first of these was www.RealClearPolitics.com, founded by an advertising executive (Tom Bevan) and an options trader (John McIntyre) from Chicago with a conservative political bent. This web site appeared for the 2000 campaign and quickly became a centralized source of average poll results on the standing of the candidates for many political junkies by the 2002 election cycle. By 2004, another site appeared (www.MysteryPollster.com) developed by a former Democratic pollster (Mark Blumenthal). In the fall of 2005, a blog appeared about polls posted by a political scientist at the University of Wisconsin (Charles Franklin) as <http://politicalarithmetik.blogspot.com>; by 2007, these two sites had merged to form www.Pollster.com.⁷ In March, 2008, the most sophisticated of the polling aggregators appeared as www.FiveThirtyEight.com, the work of a baseball statistician (Nate Silver) who had been blogging on www.DailyKos.com. In the 2008 campaign, the site www.Pollster.com received the results of more than 3,700 poll press releases that included horse race questions on the presidential election.⁸

The methodology of aggregating polls is limited to certain concepts and measures because it is based upon an assumption that, all other things being equal, polls that use similar questions with similar response categories that collect data at about the same time will produce similar estimates around the true value in the population. This means that almost all of the averaging is employed to measure things like the relative standing of the candidates in an election (based upon the commonalities of the trial heat question), presidential approval, or a limited number of additional common items/concepts such as whether the country is on the “right track” or “wrong track.”⁹ Without going into excruciating detail, RealClearPolitics employs the simplest methodology, just taking an average of recent polls measuring one of these concepts. This approach tends to wash out “house effects” or the systematic differences in estimates produced by different polling firms due to the specific techniques that they use in data collection.¹⁰ These

differences could be due to any or all of such factors as sampling error, question wording, question order or any number of internal adjustments that are made to the raw data for the full sample such as “likely voter” models or weighting algorithms. Furthermore, the polls might have different sample sizes, be conducted during different field periods or even involve samples of different populations.¹¹ And there is always the possibility of including an “outlier” that has generated a result that seems very different from others produced at about the same time.

And there is always a question of how many poll results are being aggregated at any particular time, an issue that is particularly important because news organizations cannot resist talking about the dynamics of the candidates’ standing in relation to each other and to their previous standing. A serious complication arises when poll averages are based upon different numbers of polls at two points in time and the observed difference between the averages might be the result of dropping or adding a single poll, i.e., a five-poll average compared to a four-poll average or vice versa.¹² A significantly more complicated version of this problem occurs near the end of the campaign when tracking polls are being included in the averaging and one new day’s result is added to a three-day rolling average for a particular pollster as the first day’s results are dropped. That is to say, two-thirds of the data are the same, but one-third is replaced with fresh information.

A number of methodological issues have been raised about taking simple averages of poll results. Some who do this claim that this produces a smaller margin of error because the sample size of the assembled polling data is greater than for any single constituent poll. That is not intuitively clear as the specifics of the sample designs employed in each poll would have to be taken into account, and it never is in terms of establishing a weighted total sample size. CNN skirts this issue by declaring that when they use a poll of polls estimate, there is no sampling error.¹³ This is clearly incorrect as well; they choose not to make the complicated calculation that would be required, partly because the individual pollsters do not make all of the necessary data elements available. In the context of an election campaign, there are other more important issues.¹⁴ Polling organizations have their own techniques for determining or estimating who is going to go to the polls through their “likely voter” models. Combining all of these differences in a process akin to making mashed potatoes does not necessarily take advantage of the best qualities of each of the ingredients.

At Pollster.com, they started with poll averages but relatively quickly supplanted that with a regression-based technique that effectively smoothed the trend line in a candidate’s standing, as well as the difference between the candidates based upon the trial heat questions.¹⁵ At this site, they also changed their plotting of results to include not only the regressed estimation trend but

to allow viewers to select specific polling data points so they could learn about the polling organization, the field dates and the type of sample. Clicking on a data point produces a highlighted track of the organization's results for that question over time.

Nate Silver has produced the most elaborate aggregation procedure for public opinion data, based upon his statistical training and prior experience as the producer of a newsletter for fantasy baseball fans. He employed a combination of modeling and simulation in the 2008 campaign to produce estimates of where the candidates stood state by state which, in turn, could be translated into estimates of electoral votes based upon the likely outcomes at the state level. He begins by evaluating the accuracy record of each pollster and then incorporates an indicator of sampling error, based upon sample sizes, as well as temporal error, based upon the date of the field work in relation to the date of the election. But he adds into this "nearest neighbor analysis" that looks at how the candidates are doing in states that have voted in a similar way in past elections. He also incorporates demographic data and past election outcomes into simulations that he runs every day in order to update his estimates.¹⁶ So the final product from this web site, while very accurate in terms of his final predictions for the outcome of the 2008 presidential election (or even statewide elections), is very far from simple estimation based upon an averaging of polls. Public opinion researchers do not yet have an appropriate or concise way to describe what the data aggregators do. What Nate Silver does is far from polling, and poll data represent only a small but important input into what he does. At present, his methods represent the pinnacle of the movement toward aggregating poll data, in conjunction with other information, to represent current public opinion.¹⁷

Election Polling at CNN

In the analysis of current trends in polling and the use of polling data, CNN is used as the case study. CNN has had a long interest in polling, and they have produced poll-based coverage for several elections. CNN was launched in 1980, and election night coverage was a central part of what they did right from the start.¹⁸ In 1992, they began their polling efforts after established a long-term relationship with the Gallup Organization (Plissner, 1999, 112), described in greater detail below. In 1989, they were an original partner in the establishment of the Voter Research and Surveys (VRS) exit polls, as well as in the Voter News Service (VNS) that succeeded it in 1993, and then in the National Election Pool (NEP) established for the 2004 campaign.¹⁹ On election night, they shared their decision desk with CBS News from 1996 to 2000, when they — as all of the other networks - changed their call of Florida several times in the course of the evening.²⁰ This resulted in a series of changes in their election night procedures (CNN, 2001); and by 2002, CNN had developed its own election night decision operation that became the basis for the eventual NEP model in 2004. (Frankovic, 2004)

Changes in the Regular News Programming on CNN

In its current programming format, there are three main news magazine shows on CNN that went on the air since the 2004 campaign. “CNN Newsroom” (Newsroom) is broadcast seven days a week, with slightly different formats on the weekdays and weekends. Established in 2006, Newsroom is on the air for seven hours on weekdays, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. On Saturday it airs for eight hours in the period from 10 a.m. to midnight, with breaks for alternative programming and newscasts and updates. On Sundays, it airs for five hours in the afternoon and evening between 2 p.m. and midnight. There is a single presenter for any particular broadcast, but the individual changes during various periods of each day. “Anderson Cooper 360” is a two-hour show broadcast each day between 10 p.m. and midnight, with the first hour live and the second usually a taped replay of it unless there is breaking news. It is named after its host, and it was put on the air in 2003 and assumed its current format in November 2007. The Situation Room is hosted by Wolf Blitzer and airs each weekday from 4 to 7 p.m. In 2009, after the period covered here, it also began to air a one-hour Saturday version. Taking all of these programming changes into account and the expansion in air time they represent, there was pressure on CNN producers to create content for an additional 12 hours of news magazine programming on weekdays during the 2008 campaign that did not exist in the 2004 campaign.

The “Divorce” between Gallup and CNN

A case study on how polling arrangements have changed and the consequences for journalism can be found in the recent experiences of CNN. Over the years, CNN had engaged a number of firms to conduct polling for it. This included collaboration with *Time* magazine that used the firm Schulman, Ronca & Bukavalis in the 2004 campaign. That same collaboration also used data collected by Harris Interactive in the period between 2001 and 2004. But after 14 years of collaboration, something went wrong with the partnership between Gallup and CNN in March, 2006.²¹ This was actually part of a three-way arrangement among Gallup, CNN and *USA Today*, but the initial disclosure of a change in the relationship — through a leaked memo from Jim Clifton, the Gallup CEO — made it clear that Gallup would stay with the largest circulation newspaper in the United States but was extracting itself from its relationship with its cable partner because of low ratings. During the 2004 campaign, Gallup had started its own daily webcasts as part of a move to a subscription service for their web site; and it was looking to build its own video brand.²² Beyond the news of the breakup itself, the details about who initiated the action and why were murky in the initial press coverage.²³

As might be expected when such a long-term relationship is involved, the breakup was not heralded by a significant press effort; rather the divorce became public through a series of web

postings on news-related sites as well as on the Drudge Report web site, almost all of which appeared in the course of a single news cycle.²⁴ Gallup struck the first blow when a memo dated March 15 appeared first, about one week later. Clifton's memo to the Gallup staff acknowledged that over the years of the contract, the partnership with CNN had been "very helpful" to Gallup in re-establishing national coverage for the Gallup Poll. Clifton offered two explanations or justifications for the move, one economic and the other journalistic. On the first count, Clifton said "CNN has far fewer viewers than it did in the past, and we feel that our brand is getting lost and diluted ... We have only about 200,000 viewers during our CNN segments." At the same time, *USA Today* had 2.4 million subscribers and more than three times as many readers per day. He also suggested that Gallup had a plan to develop its own e-broadcasting programs. On the second count, Clifton argued that "Frank [Newport] and other Gallup analysts will be seen as more independent so they will be more likely to be invited on a wide variety of television shows rather than primarily linked to CNN."

For a variety of reasons, CNN could not let the Gallup presentation of the breakup stand without some refutation. A CNN senior vice president, Laurie Goldberg, made several media contacts to indicate a number of inaccuracies and misrepresentations of fact. The inaccuracies start with a disagreement about the CNN viewership. The CNN statement indicated that CNN's monthly average viewership was 66.7 million, a large number but not one that directly addresses the size of viewership for the Gallup spots that they claimed. CNN also said that Gallup had been negotiating for four months to preserve their relationship before deciding to pull out. And finally, CNN indicated that it had been "in the process of reevaluating our polling strategy and have been in discussion with a number of other polling services." So the breakup was not completely unexpected. And finally, CNN ended their statement by decrying the circumstances under which "Mr. Clifton's insecurity about the strength of the Gallup brand has pushed him to send out an inaccurate and unprofessional email to his staff."

Leaving aside the melodramatic content and without needing to sort out exactly why the divorce occurred, there are some enduring themes here that date all the way back to the 1930's and the rise of public polling. The first is the interest of news organizations in having a polling partner in order to provide content for their political coverage. CNN did not express an interest in getting out of the polling business or going without a partner after their contract with Gallup ended in 2006; they claim they were looking for another partner even as they sensed that negotiations with Gallup were breaking down. At the same time, it is clear that Gallup was not foregoing media partners all together; they justified their change on the basis of audience size. This time, we have the pollster arguing for the appearance of greater independence rather than as the news organizations did in the 1970's, in effect making the claim on the news side that

they did not want to be tied down to a single broadcast partner and on the business side that they saw their future in their own broadcasting and webcasting potential.

Gallup continued its extensive polling program after 2006, engaged in its partnership with *USA Today* and expanding its web presence at www.gallup.com. Our particular interest is the path that CNN took after the divorce, looking at the nature and extent of its polling effort. By comparing its polling efforts in the coverage of the 2004 campaign to 2008, the presidential elections before and after the breakup, we can get some purchase on the level of effort, the types of polls reported, and the nature of the reporting on polls in their campaign coverage. This will also provide an interesting case study evaluation of the trends that Rosensteil foresaw in 2005.

CNN Polling in the 2008 Campaign Compared to 2004

After the “divorce” with Gallup, CNN adopted a three-pronged strategy to continue to produce polling data that contributed to its news coverage. On the one hand, it searched for another polling firm with which to partner for its national surveys. Secondly, having already merged some business operations with *Time* magazine in 2005,²⁵ another Time Warner property, it continued its polling operation for data in battleground states in collaboration with them before eventually moving the work to its new polling partner. And at the same time, it expanded its use of another technique that had grown up in the reporting of poll results, taking an average of recent poll results to produce something they called the CNN “poll of polls” — an aggregation of other organizations’ polls — that could be incorporated into its newscasts.

The CNN/Opinion Research Corporation Partnership

Ten months after the breakup with Gallup but well in advance of the 2008 presidential campaign, CNN announced that it had found a new polling partner, the Opinion Research Corporation (ORC), also located in Princeton, New Jersey.²⁶ The firm traces its lineage back to 1938, having been founded by Claude Robinson, an early collaborator with Dr. Gallup. Harking back to a statement in Clifton’s memo, CNN’s Sam Feist said in the January 12, 2007 press release that they selected ORC because of its “reputation for independent, objective analysis.”²⁷ The partners had discussions about polling plans for the network’s campaign coverage, including scope and content.

The selection of ORC did not go without comment on the blogosphere and in the media. Just prior to the announcement, ORC was purchased by a major database marketing and list management company, InfoUSA, owned by Vinod Gupta.²⁸ He had been a very active supporter of Bill Clinton both in and out of office and was supporting Hillary Clinton’s run for the nomination. This led to claims that the early polling in the primaries that ORC would do for

CNN would be biased in Hillary Clinton's favor. This speculation was further fueled by the disclosure that in December 2007, the Clinton campaign rented its list of contributors to InfoUSA as a small fundraising technique, prompting additional scrutiny in the media and on the blogosphere.²⁹

Under ordinary circumstances, one would expect that there would be more coverage — and more poll-based coverage — of the 2008 campaign compared to the 2004 campaign. The 2004 campaign involved an entrenched incumbent, George W. Bush, who had steered the country through the aftermath of September 11, 2001 and then engineered the invasion of Iraq. It is always difficult to oust a sitting president during war time, and there was no contest in the Republican primaries for the nomination. At the same time, the 2008 election was the first truly open election — when no president or sitting vice-president was seeking the office — since 1952. Both the Democratic and Republican fields of announced or interested candidates were quite large, suggesting that the primary battles would be hotly contested. The general election battle would be wide open, surely involving assessments of the Bush administration because of questions raised by the Democrats and their nominee, whoever that would be. There were a number of issues surrounding the war in Iraq that would be addressed as well, including the conditions of entry into the war, the conduct of the fighting and its success, and differences in policies for an eventual withdrawal. Since the electorate would be learning about two new presidential nominees who had no prior leadership experience of their own in the White House, there were ample opportunities for polling to support coverage that would focus on assessments of the nominee's policies and leadership qualities.

Various forms of content analysis were conducted that focused on poll-based coverage of the 2004 and 2008 campaigns. In the first stage, to test the hypothesis about the relative frequency of polls, the strategy was to search for polls that the network commissioned for use on air based upon national samples essentially in the pre-2004 style of media polling. This showed that the expectation of more national polls in 2008 was not fulfilled; there were more polls conducted by CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup in 2004 than by CNN/ORC in 2008.³⁰ Data are presented in Table 1 that show, overall, there were about 40% fewer commissioned national polls in 2008 than in 2004, 21 compared to 33.

Table 1. A Comparison of the Number of National Polls Commissioned by CNN in the 2004 and 2008 Presidential Campaigns, Overall and by Campaign Period.

	2004	2008
Overall	33	21
Primary campaigns	17 ^a	7
Post-primaries/ Pre-convention	6 ^b	4
General election campaign/ Post-Labor Day	10	10

^a Includes 9 polls completed before the Democratic nominee was known.

^b Includes 7 polls leading up to the Democratic convention, held first.

The campaign period was divided into three parts: the primary period starting approximately one month before the Iowa caucus (beginning in December of the preceding year), and running until each party's nominee was known; the period after the primaries through the nominating conventions; and the general election period running from approximately Labor Day until Election Day. The reason for this was the belief that in the earliest period the focus of the polls would be on the intra-party contest and who would get the nomination. When the presumptive nominees became known, the focus would shift to trial heat pairings reflecting the eventual general election campaign but based perhaps on a less well informed electorate at this stage. And post-convention, everything would be focused on the general election campaign with the actual nominees.

There were exactly the same number of polls conducted in the general election period after Labor Day in each year, including separate polls after each of the three debates (two presidential and one vice-presidential), reflecting the carrying capacity of a news organization to do its own poll-based story packages at about one a week in this period. So the reduction in polling effort came in the preceding campaign periods. There was a one-third reduction across the summer, between the end of the primaries and the nominating conventions, as there were 6 national polls conducted in this period in 2004 and only 4 polls in 2008. It is important to note that the 2008 conventions were held as late as they have ever been, in order not to compete with the 2008 Summer Olympics. In theory, this should have allowed for more polls across the summer, but a reluctance to compete for air time and the attention of members of the electorate during this period could explain the reduction. But the number of national polls conducted during the primaries was reduced by almost 60% across the two election cycles, and the contest between Senators Clinton and Obama ran the full length of the calendar for the first time since

the system of compulsory primaries and caucuses with pledged delegates was instituted in 1976, all the way to June 3.

CNN also took the opportunity to increase its polling effort in the battleground states in the 2008 general election period. They organized an effort with *Time* magazine to conduct polls in up to five states per week, starting late in August. The interviewing dates and schedule were selected to provide content for each week's issue of *Time* during the general election campaign, and the number of states covered each week reflected a judgment about how much content could be produced for an issue. The results of these polls in the battleground states were reported in a very precise summary in "The Briefing" section of each week's issue. All told, ORC produced 11 weeks of data, ranging from three to five states polled each week. There were 51 state polls conducted in this period, covering 21 different states; the focus changed a little during the course of the general election campaign as additional information came available from a variety of sources about the nature of the contests across the 50 states.

Perhaps it was inevitable that CNN/ORC would produce poll results at odds with a Gallup result, but no one would have predicted it for the first poll of the 2008 general election campaign, right after Labor Day and the two conventions. This was the period when the first polls were being conducted at the start of the general election campaign, right after Labor Day and the late Democratic and Republican conventions. The CNN/Opinion Research Corporation poll showed a dead heat between Barack Obama and John McCain (48%-48%), while *USA Today*/Gallup gave McCain a 10 percentage point lead (54%-44%). Most of the other media polls showed a tight contest between Obama and McCain, similar to the CNN/ORC result. The NBC/*Wall Street Journal* poll showed the Democrat up by one percentage point (47%-46%), while the ABC/*Washington Post* poll showed McCain up by two percentage points (47%-49%).

This difference was of course fodder for the blogosphere, especially on the liberal side, who had been critical of Gallup almost through the entire campaign based upon their likely voter models.³¹ Gallup seemed consistently to produce samples with more self-identified Republicans in them, thereby producing higher estimates of support for McCain. At the same time, they were also struggling with their likely voter model that had historically been based upon a series of items that included a record of voting in past elections. Their experience especially in the Democratic primaries, starting with New Hampshire, showed that they were not accounting for newly registered and energized voters who were supporting Obama. So in mid-October they started producing two estimates of the relative standing of the candidates, one based upon their "traditional" model and a second based upon their "expanded" model that took only "current voting intention" into account.³² When it was first introduced, Obama lead by seven percentage points in the expanded model but only by four in the traditional model.³³

Polling in the 2008 Primaries

The comparison between the primary periods in 2004 and 2008 has to include state-level polls that were conducted for CNN in the two election cycles as well. In 2004, most firms polled only on the Democratic side as the incumbent President George W. Bush was seeking re-election without any opposition.³⁴ In this primary campaign, CNN partnered with Gallup and *USA Today* to conduct a tracking poll in New Hampshire for a week leading up to the January 27 primary, providing seven daily releases of results. CNN also collaborated with *The Los Angeles Times* to conduct pre-primary polls in Arizona, Missouri and South Carolina, all of which held primaries on February 3. This represents a modest level of poll-based coverage but one that was appropriate to the nature of the contest on the Democratic side. As in all of the previous primary contests since the new system was adopted in 1976, John Kerry had the nomination wrapped up by early March.

In 2008, the polling plan for the primaries changed and expanded significantly because of contests in both the Democratic and Republican parties as CNN found partners with which to share the costs. CNN established a relationship with the University of New Hampshire Survey Research Center and WMUR, a local television station. They organized a kind of tracking poll that involved 11 separate samples of approximately 300 respondents in each of the state's two primaries that ran from June 2007 to January 5-6, 2008.³⁵ Six of these polling dates (12 polls counting the two primaries) fell within a month of the actual New Hampshire primary, the definition of the primary period in Table 1, and might have been included there were they not state-level samples. In the remaining primaries, CNN often partnered with *The Los Angeles Times* and the web site Politico.com in a series of surveys conducted by Opinion Research Corporation. The polls were conducted in five additional states (California, Florida, Iowa, Nevada, and South Carolina), involving eight separate survey dates in all. This selection was undoubtedly based upon an assumption that someone in each party would become the presumptive nominee by early March. In four of the states, interviews were conducted with likely voters in both the Democratic and Republican primaries, so a total of 14 polls in all were conducted.

While John McCain did secure the Republican nomination on the "old" schedule as his opposition withdrew, the contest between Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama ran on in a hard-fought battle all the way through the primary schedule. CNN conducted a series of "national" primary surveys, the seven enumerated in Table 1, which evaluated the relative standing of Obama and Clinton in that context as well as their relative prospects against McCain. Furthermore, they moved to the use of the CNN "poll of polls" as described in greater detail below in lieu of conducting their own pre-primary polls in the later states. And CNN also

took the unusual step of sponsoring its own exit poll after the Puerto Rico primary on June 1 as the race went down to the wire for each and every delegate. Beyond these state-level polls, CNN also conducted national polls during the primaries, as shown in Table 1, involving 21 surveys in all.

The Poll of Polls in the Lead-up to the Conventions

Given its added news magazine shows, its lack of sports programming in an Olympic summer, and the late date of the conventions because of the Olympics, CNN had a lot of air time to fill. On the face of it, it was surprising that the number of national polls that the network sponsored in 2008 was so low — absolutely and in relation to 2004. These polls focused entirely on the relative standing of the candidates, based upon different pairings in the trial heat questions. But in this period, CNN began to employ results from its “poll of polls,” an experiment it had begun in 2004. The data summarized in Table 2 show how much more prominent the use of the technique became in 2008 in the lead up to the conventions.³⁶

Table 2. The Number of Days on Which a New CNN Poll of Polls Was Released in the Pre-Convention Period in the 2004 and 2008 Campaigns, Summarized by Month.

	2004 Campaign	2008 Campaign
June	—	9
July	—	7
August	—	9
TOTAL	0	25

In the 2004 campaign, CNN did not use data compiled from a poll of polls over the summer period leading up to the conventions. But in 2008, they used this device on 25 days of news coverage in the same period. In each use, they compared the average level of support for Barack Obama and John McCain. And in almost every case, they discussed the margin between them, often with a reference to the change in the lead since the previous reading.

The Poll of Polls during the General Election Campaign

The poll of polls was used intermittently in the 2004 general election campaign, with only one reference in September and uses about every other day in October. Since Election Day 2004 was November 2, the results were only presented on the first day of that month. In the 2008 campaign, the use of the summary started on June 5, at the end of the Democratic primaries,

and it was employed sparingly in July and August leading up to the conventions. Starting in September, there was a poll of polls result almost every day, with only a few days skipped in September and October. Since Election Day 2008 was November 4, the results were presented on the first three days of the month. On eight days in this period, CNN reported the results of their own CNN/ORC polls; and on four of those days, there were no results reported from their poll of polls. In other words, a great deal of the use of the poll of polls was to fill in on days when CNN had no survey of their own; CNN tended not to report on poll of polls results when they were releasing their own survey data — even if the gap was only one or two days. On those days, the results from the previous day were reported.

Data are presented in Table 3 that show the difference in the use of poll of polls information in the general election period in the two campaigns. Compared to 2004, CNN used this form of analysis early and often. They employed this information on 25 days in September compared to only one day in 2004. In October 2008, the references were twice as frequent as in 2004, and the references tapered off in November of each year but were still more frequent in 2008. The November difference can be accounted for by the fact that Election Day 2008 was later in 2008 than in 2004.

Table 3. The Number of Days on Which a New CNN Poll of Polls Was Released in the General Election Period in the 2004 and 2008 Campaigns, Summarized by Month.

	2004 Campaign	2008 Campaign
September	1	24
October	14	29
November	1	3
TOTAL	16	56

CNN also reported on state-level poll of polls figures in the general election campaign. At the end of the campaign, the CNN election site on the web listed these results for 19 states.³⁷ State-level poll results were much more difficult to come by as a lot of this work was being done by IVR firms, and CNN — as many other poll aggregators — did not include them in their averages. The range of state-level polls available was from two to five. For 10 of the 19 states, the data were available through the last weekend of the campaign; and for seven of the states, they were available through the last week of the campaign. But for two of the states, Michigan and New Jersey, the data used to compute the average came from late or mid-September polls

respectively. And for Michigan, in a short period of time in September, the poll of polls average started with data from three polls, then a fourth was added, and then a fifth was added.

In both campaign cycles, the number of individual polls that went into the computation of the CNN poll of polls national average was wide ranging. As the data presented in Table 4 show, in 2004 the minimum number of polls used to compute an average was five; in the 2008 campaign, where the poll of polls number was used almost every day, sometimes there were as few as three polls used to compute the average. Approximately half of the days there were three or four polls used, while for the other half there were five or more. With more air time to fill, the network produced more average results often based upon fewer data points.

Table 4. The Distribution of the Number of Individual Polls Used to Compute the CNN Poll of Polls in the 2004 and 2008 Poll of Polls.

	2004 Campaign	2005 Campaign
3	—	26
4	—	13
5	3	17
6	5	9
7	1	6
8	2	7
9	—	1
10	3	1
11	2	1
TOTAL	16	81

The Treatment of the CNN Poll of Polls on the Air

In the 2008 campaign, CNN began to make use of the poll of polls on June 1, which left 157 days in the campaign. A content analysis was conducted of the transcripts of the three main news magazine shows on CNN — the Newsroom, the Situation Room, and Anderson Cooper 360 (AC 360) — searching for all references to “CNN poll of polls” in each. The result of this effort was a count of the number of days on which at least one reference appeared on a show, as well as the total for all three shows. In addition, a data file was constructed that included the text of all of the references themselves in order to understand the context in which the references were made.

Generally, the reporting of the poll of polls was different on each of these three programs. On Newsroom, the results were presented in a more straightforward news fashion, typically providing information on the standing of the two candidates, how far apart they were, and sometimes background information on which individual polls were used to construct the average. The Situation Room and Anderson Cooper 360 often used a format that involved panels of experts on the set to provide commentary, so the introduction of the information from the poll of polls was frequently used as a jumping off spot for a conversation among the panelists. Sometimes, the results from the poll of polls were used to lead into other elements of the programming. An example of this occurred on September 7 when the level of “Undecideds” stood at 13%, and this fact was used to lead into a segment in which such voters were interviewed about why they had not made up their minds yet.

Across the period of their use, there were a total of 118 shows, out of a theoretical maximum of 471 (or 25%), in which there were references to the CNN poll of polls. The greatest number appeared on Newsroom (51 shows), presumably because they had the most airtime to fill each day. There were 37 shows on which there was a reference on the Situation Room, and 30 shows on which there was a reference on AC 360. In the period after the conventions, when the general election campaign was formally underway, the horse race coverage really kicked into gear. There were no references at all on 40 days; a reference appeared on only one show on 47 days, on two shows on 22 days, and on all three shows on 9 days.

The 2008 Republican convention was held after the Democratic, from September 1 through 4, so the real assessment of the general election contest could not be taken until people had the opportunity to see the convention on their own or were exposed to the media coverage in the next couple of news cycles *and* the pollsters had a chance to measure people’s reactions to all of that. This was particularly important in the 2008 campaign because of the surprise selection of Sarah Palin as the Republican vice-presidential candidate. CNN made six references to their poll of polls numbers from September 5 to 8, with four of those on the Newsroom and one each on the Situation Room and AC 360. But it was only on September 9 that the anchors indicated that the poll of polls numbers was composed of surveys conducted entirely after the Republican convention, on the Newsroom and AC 360.

From then on, there were 54 campaign days left (or a maximum of 162 shows), and the poll of polls number was referred to on 26 shows in the Newsroom (almost half), 20 shows on AC 360, and 17 shows on the Situation Room, for a total of 39% of the shows. Again, it is not surprising that the greatest number of references appeared on the Newsroom because this show had the most air time to fill and had multiple anchors each day. In this period on any given day, there were no references at all on 16 days, on only one show on 18 days, on two shows on 15 days,

and all three shows on 5 days. References to the poll of polls number appeared on all three shows on four days during the last two weeks of coverage.

It was also possible to keep track of the separate “conversations” that took place involving the poll of polls data on each show on each day. A conversation involves an anchor discussing the results with a different person on air; each conversation could itself involve multiple mentions of the results, but that is not the unit of analysis here. The data presented in Table 5 show that there were fewer days when there were no conversations about the poll of polls on the Newsroom than the other two shows, as indicated above. When the poll of polls data appeared on the Newsroom, they tended to involve slightly more conversations, again attributable to the fact that there was more air time to fill and there were different anchors across the longer time span that the show was on the air. AC 360 had the same number of conversations as the Situation Room, but there were relatively more conversations about the data on the Situation Room. Some days were unusual in the amount of discussion of the data. On August 20, the poll of polls was discussed seven times on the Newsroom and five times on the Situation Room.

Table 5. The Distribution of the Number of Conversations Involving the CNN Poll of Polls on a Given Show for Three CNN Magazine Shows, September 9 to November 3, 2008.

# of Conversations	Newsroom	Situation Room	AC 360
0	29	36	35
1	13	9	15
2	7	6	3
3	4	2	1
4	—	—	—
5	1	1	—
6	—	—	—
7	1	—	—

Part of the evaluation of the appropriateness of the poll of polls as a device to replace actual polls depends on the content of the information and how it is used. It is important to note that the poll of polls cannot be a substitute for an entire poll sponsored by the network because it is limited to the summary of the results from the same single question, implying essentially the same wording and response categories. That is why the averages are typically limited to the standings of the candidates, individually and in terms of the difference between them, because

news organizations believe that the trial heat question asked in virtually every poll during the campaign satisfies this requirement.³⁸

A review of the way that the poll of polls results were described on CNN Newsroom during the general election highlights the pitfalls and problems of reporting on public opinion this way.³⁹ The content analysis showed that the vast majority of mentions of the poll of polls referred to changes in the relative standing of the candidates from a previous day's results. The most common theme in the presentation of the poll of polls data was a discussion of movement in the campaign, a distinct theme related to the reporting on the dynamics of the contest as a well-documented tendency in political coverage. And there was relatively little difference among the programs in this regard; Newsroom reported on the movement in the polls in 62% of their stories, the Situation Room in 53%, and AC 360 in 57%.

One of the biggest problems in news about the poll of polls is anchors who report on changes that are not statistically significant. For example, on October 15, an anchor described the difference between an Obama lead of seven percentage points compared to six percentage points the day before. The first point is that seven percentage points is not statistically distinguishable from six; since the margin of error on a difference in percentages is typically twice the margin of error around a single estimate, the change in the difference would have to be very large (much more than one percentage point) to be described as "real." Furthermore, each of the averages is based upon data from the same six polling firms; but at this point in the campaign, three of them were tracking polls, producing a new estimate each day (Gallup, Diageo/Hotline, and Reuters/C-SPAN/Zogby) based upon their own rolling three-day average. So the difference came from one or more single-day samples that changed the estimate from the organization. Another example of this is a reference on the September 7 show as follows, "We showed you a poll yesterday that was about a 2 or 3 point difference. Tonight it's down to one point."

To put a fine point on this problem, Anderson Cooper reported on October 21 that "there are a number of developing stories right now, the big political story tonight, a new surge for Barack Obama. In CNN's latest poll of polls, Obama is up two points from yesterday, leading McCain by nine points, 51-42 percent, 7 percent unsure." On the next evening, he provides an update as "More now on the new numbers — the race tightening somewhat in the national polls, but widening in states that President Bush won four years ago, and John McCain needs to survive — the new CNN poll of polls showing a seven-point Obama lead nationally, two points closer than just yesterday. It was nine points last night, if you remember." But the next night, Cooper comments, "The new polling shows the Obama lead growing, now nine points in tonight's CNN poll of polls, up two points from last night." None of these differences were statistically

significant compared to the others, and there is no commentary on the third day about how the difference was just the same as the first day. The main focus of the news is just on the difference from the day before.

A detailed comparison of the constituent elements of each day's average for the poll of polls in this example shows the following. The first day's estimate was based upon six polls, four of which were tracking polls. The results from Pew, CNN/ORC, ABC/*Washington Post* (T), Reuters/C-SPAN/Zogby (T), Gallup (T) and the Diageo/Hotline (T) were used to produce the average. On October 22, a total of 11 polls were used to construct the average where the difference between Obama and McCain "dropped" two percentage points lower, consisting of the same six polls as well as results from the American Research Group, Franklin & Marshall, IPSOS-McClatchy, Fox/Opinion Dynamics (T), and AP/GfK. The estimate for October 23 was again based upon six polls, four of which were used two days earlier (ABC/*Washington Post* (T), Reuters/C-SPAN/Zogby (T), Gallup (T) and Diageo/Hotline (T)), while two were different (CBS News/*New York Times* and Fox/Opinion Dynamics (T), a poll used the day before but not two days before). While some of the "shifts" in preference may have been due to individual voters changing their minds, it is much more likely that the differences in the averages were due to estimates from different firms that were used to compute the averages.

These shifts and their consequences can be best understood by reference to Table 6, where the constituent polls are presented and some with particularly large or small margins between the two candidates are highlighted. One alternative explanation for the drop in the difference in support for Obama over McCain between October 21 and 22 is that the Pew survey was dropped from the computation. With an Obama lead of 14 percentage points, the largest of any survey, it accounts for more than one percentage point in the average by itself. Second, a survey done for the Associated Press by GfK/Roper was added the second day that showed a one percentage point advantage for Obama, a much smaller lead than any other poll. And there were three additional surveys that showed small leads (five percentage points in the Franklin and Marshall poll done for a Hearst newspaper; a five percentage point lead in the Diageo/Hotline tracking poll, down two percentage points from the day before; and a four percentage point lead in a poll conducted by the American Research Group). And the explanation for the increase in the margin on October 23, with only six polls going into the computation, could be due to the addition of the CBS News/*New York Times* poll with a lead of 13 percentage points, and the exclusion of the AP poll from the day before with the one percentage point lead. It is also worth pointing out that CNN used the data from the same Fox/Opinion Dynamics poll on all three days but did not include an intermediate estimate from Reuters/C-SPAN/Zogby that was available for October 22.

Table 6. The Constituent Surveys and Their Results Used to Compute the CNN Poll of Polls on October 21 to 23, 2008.⁴⁰

Polling Firm and Sponsor	Field Dates	Sample	Obama %	McCain %	Difference
Polls Used for October 21					
CNN/ORC	10/17-19	764 LV	51	46	5 p.p.
Pew	10/16-19	2,382 LV	53	39	14 p.p.
ABC News/ WA Post	10/17-19	1,335 LV	53	44	9 p.p.
Reuters/ C-SPAN/Zogby	10/18-20	1,214 LV	50	42	8 p.p.
Gallup	10/16-18	2,277 LV	51	44	7 p.p.
Diageo/Hotline	10/16-18	785 LV	48	41	7 p.p.
Polls Used for October 22					
CNN/ORC	10/17-19	764 LV	51	46	5 p.p.
Pew	10/16-19	2,382 LV	53	39	14 p.p.
Reuters/CSPAN/Zogby	10/18-20	1,214 LV	50	42	8 p.p.
ABC News/ WA Post	10/18-21	1,330 LV	54	43	11 p.p.
IPSOS/McClatchy	10/16-20	773 LV	50	42	8 p.p.
AP/GfK-Roper	10/16-20	800 LV	44	43	1 p.p.
Fox News/ Opinion Dynamics	10/20-21	936 LV	49	40	9 p.p.
Franklin & Marshall	10/13-19	? LV	50	45	5 p.p.
American Research Group	10/18-20	1,200 LV	49	45	4 p.p.
Diageo/Hotline	10/19-21	782 LV	47	42	5 p.p.
Gallup	10/19-21	2,331 LV	52	44	8 p.p.
Polls Used for October 23					
Reuters/ C-Span/Zogby	10/20-22	1,206 LV	52	40	12 p.p.
ABC News/ WA Post	10/19-22	1,335 LV	54	43	11 p.p.
Gallup	10/20-22	2,349 LV	51	45	6 p.p.
Diageo/Hotline	10/20-22	782 LV	47	42	5 p.p.
CBS News/ NY Times	10/19-22	771 LV	52	39	13 p.p.
Fox News/ Opinion Dynamics	10/20-21	936 LV	49	40	9 p.p.

The issue becomes more complicated when a poll of polls estimate is compared to a prior one that is perhaps from a week earlier, as happened on September 8. Or it is even more complicated when the poll of polls estimate right after the Republican convention is compared to an estimate produced just before it in order to assess the impact of the selection of Sarah Palin

as the Republican vice-presidential candidate, as happened on September 7. Another example of the inferred causal explanation linked to a change in one candidate's lead occurred on August 6 when the commentator said, "And with CNN's latest poll of polls showing Obama with just a three-point lead over McCain, Republican strategists think the negative ads are working." This is a common problem in poll-based reporting, made worse in the poll of polls mode. No one knows who saw the ads and who didn't, or what their preferences were before they might have seen them.

Another issue is comparing the poll of polls results to a single CNN/ORC national sample and trying to explain any differences that might occur. At the end of the campaign, on November 3 for example, in both estimates the difference was seven percentage points, but the estimates for each candidate were different because the CNN/ORC poll typically had a small number of undecided voters, less than the poll of polls. On some occasions, the results from the CNN/ORC poll of polls were compared to results from a quickie poll appearing on the CNN web site to which viewers were directed. For example, on Anderson Cooper 360 on April 29, 2009, they used on-line data collected from their viewers and others who went to the CNN web site to grade President Obama (and others in Washington). The on-line self-selected sample gave Obama an average grade of C+, slightly more negative than the average grade from the recent CNN/ORC national probability sample where he received an average grade of B-. The comparison between the two grades is inappropriate because of the difference between a true probability sample and the self-selected web site visitors. Furthermore, the web site people were asked to respond to a single question, while the survey respondents graded Obama in Question 8, following previous questions about presidential approval, Obama's leadership qualities, evaluations of Democratic and Republican leaders in Congress, and favorability ratings of six political leaders, including Obama. So context played a role here.

Conclusion

A variety of economic pressures have placed demands on news organizations to produce more content at a lower cost. This has affected contemporary newspapers through reductions in the number of journalists they employ, in turn placing constraints on the type and frequency of stories that they can pursue. These forces have accelerated in the past 18 months, producing reduction in the coverage that many organizations could devote to the 2008 presidential campaign. For broadcast news organizations, there have been additional pressures created by changes in program formats, including a move to more news magazine shows. CNN is a good example of these pressures as it added at least 10 hours of such programming on weekdays between the 2004 and 2008 campaigns.

One way that these pressures are manifest is in the ways that CNN tried to develop poll-based content as part of their expanded political coverage. While there is a long history of the use of such content in covering campaigns, at CNN an interest in maintaining this element of their coverage in light of the additional programming demands moved them to adopt a short cut to incorporate poll data. In an inexpensive substitute for their own data, the network began to report on the average standing of the primary and general election candidates in head-to-head matchups that appeared in a number of polls produced by others. Because of the pervasive use of polls in campaign coverage, there was a lot of data to choose from. Despite legitimate concerns about this technique raised by a number of survey methodologists and statisticians, the appeal of “easy” content appears to have been too great.

A poll of polls is not a substitute for a real survey. By definition, it has to be limited to concepts on which there is a generally accepted common question wording and a common set of response categories. That is why it has been generally limited to candidate standings based upon a trial heat question. But an average standing only supports the media’s tendency to employ horse race coverage that focuses on the dynamics and strategy of the campaign. Because it is the equivalent of a one-question poll, there is no way to employ any other variables to describe or explain what the sources of the candidates’ standing or the relative difference between them might be. In other words, the use of this device exacerbates the worst tendencies of news organizations in providing contemporary campaign coverage. It does not illuminate or enhance the coverage, it stultifies it.

The broader issue with CNN and its use of a poll of polls is the degree to which this approach in 2008 portends future changes in the production of poll-based news at other organizations. The poll of polls is unlikely to be used at local stations because there is not enough data being produced at the state level to feed such a need. If changes do occur, they would happen first at another cable network because of their reliance on political news for their magazine or commentary shows. Or it could occur next at a wire service like the Associated Press that feeds a variety of news organizations, including newspapers and television stations. Or it could occur at some major or mid-market newspapers where financial stringencies mean they cannot conduct their own polls or have to cut back on the number of polls they do conduct.

In the contemporary history of poll-based coverage, critics have lamented the way that polls have been used to frame and embellish the ubiquitous amount of horse race coverage that is already used to report on campaigns. Rather than providing voters with a voice of their own in responding to and evaluating the candidates, their issue positions and the relevance of their campaigns, the poll of polls is used to reinforce the status quo in contemporary political reporting. It is an inhibitor rather than an enhancer of what campaign reporting could be.

Epilogue

Into the new political year at the start of the Obama presidency, CNN continued with its relationship with ORC and their ambitious polling program together. They conducted three national polls after the election and before the inauguration evaluating citizens' reactions to conditions in the economy, including the disclosure about Bernard Madoff's ponzi scheme. After the inauguration, they continued polling every two to three weeks to measure assessments to the new Obama administration, conducting five national surveys in all. As a central element of this effort, they of course measured presidential approval.⁴¹ They actually began by measuring approval with the presidential transition in interviews conducted between January 12 and 15, when 84% of those interviewed approved. Between February 7-8 and April 23-26, presidential approval was measured five times and ranged from 76% at the start of that period to 63% at the end, with the final four measurements approximately the same once Obama policy proposals became clearer to the public.

Obama's 100th day in office was April 29, so a CNN/ORC survey fielded April 23-26 provided content on April 27 leading up to that date. But CNN also produced estimates of Obama's approval ratings on Wednesday, April 29 and Sunday April 26 based upon a poll of polls average. An average approval rating of 66% was reported on Sunday on CNN Newsroom, but the constituent polls were not identified.⁴² The 63% rating on Wednesday was based upon an average of seven polls conducted between April 21 and 27, including the CNN/ORC poll as well as a Gallup tracking poll. There was no information available on how many polls were input to the average on Sunday. Basic information is presented in Table 7 on the sample characteristics and the results from the seven polls used to construct the poll of polls figure for Obama's approval level. Across these seven polls, the rate of approval of Obama's handling of his job as president ranged from 55 to 69 percent. Conversely, the rate of disapproval varied between 23 and 33 percent. And the level of people who "Don't Know" ranged from 4 to 14 percent.

Table 7. Sample Characteristics of the Seven Polls Comprising the CNN Poll of Polls on President Obama’s Approval Rating on April 29.^a

Polling Firm and Sponsor	Field Dates	Sample	Approve	Disapprove	Don’t Know
CNN/ORC	4/23-26	2,019 A	63	33	5
ABC News/WA Post	4/21-24	1,072 A	69	26	4
Fox/Opinion Dynamics	4/22-23	900 RV	62	29	8
CBS/NY Times	4/22-26	973 A	68	23	9
Marist	4/21-23	975 RV	55	31	14
Quinnipiac	4/21-27	2,041 RV	58	30	12
Gallup Tracking	4/25-27	1,500 A	63	31	6

^a The notation A indicates a sample of adults, and RV indicates a sample of registered voters.

There are a variety of factors that could explain these differences.⁴³ Four of the polls sampled adults, while three of them sampled registered voters. It is possible that the registered voter population is slightly more Republican than the population as a whole because of differential registration rates among partisans, as Republicans would be expected to have lower approval ratings for Barack Obama than either Independents or Democrats. The data in Table 7 show that average approval level in the adult samples was 66%, higher than for the overall average in the poll of polls, while it was 58% in the registered voter samples, lower than for the overall average and much different than in the adult samples. The linkage to partisanship is present in the four surveys where that information was provided by the survey organization. The lowest proportions of Republicans were in the ABC News/*Washington Post* and the CBS News/*New York Times* samples (21% and 20% respectively), while the highest were in the Quinnipiac and Fox News/*Opinion Dynamics* samples (34% and 31% respectively). These partisanship figures do in fact correlate with Obama’s approval ratings.⁴⁴ This raises the question “What is the real news story?” Is it the single homogenized number that comes from the poll of polls average? The range of approval levels across the policy domains? Or is it an explanation of the factors that influence evaluations of Obama in any of the arenas?

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Endnotes

¹ A concise description of the careers of these three men and their entrance into public opinion polling can be found in Converse (1987), especially pp. 111-127.

² Crespi (1980, 466) explains that “it was long the practice of the Gallup Poll not to report actual interviewing dates” in its releases so as not to run up against editors’ concerns about timeliness of the data. Instead they employed the description of “the latest” or “the most recent” to describe the Gallup Poll on which the column was based.

³ Norman Bradburn has coined the acronym SLOP to refer to such data collections, representing Self-selected Listener Opinion Polls. (Traugott and Lavrakas, 2008: 198) Traugott coined the acronym CRAP to refer to the results of IVR polls, referring to Computerized Response Audience Polls. (Traugott and Lavrakas, 2008: 181-182.)

⁴ For example, a “Quick Vote” box appears daily on <http://www.cnn.com> that permits visitors to the site to express their views on topic of the day. On April 22, for example, the question was “Will bringing Middle East leaders to Washington help the peace process?” with response options of “yes” and “No.” After voting, the visitor is taken to the results page, giving the current tabulation of responses that also contains the statement “This is not a scientific poll.” This can also produce other problems, as in the case of the March 10, 2009 CNN QuickVote that asked the question “How do you rate President Obama’s first 50 days in office?” and offered the response categories “yes” and “No” and offered the response categories of “yes” and “no.” (Available at http://huffingtonpost.com/2009/3/cnn-poll-rates-obamas-fir_n_173877.html).

⁵ The provenance of this term is discussed in Paul Farhi’s article in *The Washington Post* on November 2, 2004, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A17079-2004Nov1.html>. While the term may have been used occasionally in previous elections, it did not become the standard terminology of all political journalists until 2000.

⁶ In fact, CNN was one of the first to use the term “battleground states” in its coverage of the 2000 campaign. See for example <http://archives.cnn.com/2000/ALLPOLITICS/stories/10/28/campaign.wrap.01/index.html>.

⁷ Following the current trend in the media business, each of these sites was purchased by a larger organization. RealClearPolitics was purchased by Forbes in November, 2007, while YouGov purchased Polimetrix and Pollster.com in December, 2007. FiveThirtyEight.com has not been purchased yet, but it is difficult to imagine that it will exist independently for very long.

⁸ Personal communication from Mark Blumenthal, May 6, 2009.

⁹ Even though the responses to this question often provide an important indicator of whether the electorate will support the party in power or switch allegiances, this item is less commonly aggregated because of the differences in question wordings. These include response categories that vary between “right track/wrong track” and right track/wrong direction” and might or might not include the adjective “seriously.” For an indication of the range of variations that would make many survey methodologists nervous about doing this, see <http://www.pollingreport.com/right.htm>.

¹⁰ See http://www.pollster.com/blogs/how_pollsters_affect_poll_resu.php for a good discussion of “house effects.”

¹¹ For a discussion of these potential problems, see Carl Bialik's column in *The Wall Street Journal* at <http://online.wsj.com/public/article/SB120303346890469991.html>.

¹² This point is discussed at some length in a comment by Michael McDonald available at http://www.pollster.com/blogs/internal_measures_of_change_on.php.

¹³ For a commentary on this position, see the October 14, 2008 posting of Justin Grimmer at <http://www.iq.harvard.edu/blog/sss/archives/author/justin-grimmer/>.

¹⁴ For a discussion of these issues, see George Bishop's post at http://tpmcafe.talkingpointsmemo.com/2008/11/04/a_pox_on_the_poll_of_polls/.

¹⁵ These procedures are described in detail at http://www.pollster.com/blogs/three_estimates_explained_for.php.

¹⁶ For a discussion of Silver's methodology, the reader is referred to <http://www.fivethirtyeight.com/2008/04/pollster-ratings-v30.html>, as well as <http://www.fivethirtyeight.com/2008/03/frequently-asked-questions-last-revised.html>.

¹⁷ Silver has commented on such disparate politically relevant topics as the likelihood of Franken or Coleman winning the Minnesota senatorial race (<http://www.fivethirtyeight.com/search/label/minnesota>) or the date at which individual states would vote *against* a ban on gay marriage (<http://www.fivethirtyeight.com/2009/04/will-iowans-uphold-gay-marriage.html>).

¹⁸ An interesting historical review of their election night coverage in the form of photographs of screenshots of their anchor desks over time can be found at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/gallery/2008/nov/04/cnn-election-coverage-tv-news?picture=339282729>, including their first night's anchors Bella Abzug, Lou Dobbs, Bernard Shaw, and Mary Alice Williams in 1980.

¹⁹ All three of these developments represent attempts by the networks and the Associated Press to save money on the collection of election data, including county-level election returns by the Associated Press through the News Election Service (NES) as well as the exit poll interviewing and analysis. (Hickey, 2001) The loss of independent data collection operations might have contributed to the difficulties on Election Night 2000 (Meyer, 2000).

²⁰ See the report by Conner, Risser, and Wattenberg (2001) for a description of these events.

²¹ Gallup received criticism for its polling in the 2004 campaign, not the least of which came from a full page ad in *The New York Times* sponsored by MoveOn.org. At the time, CNN produced a piece in which Gallup defended itself against the charge of biased sampling (http://www.cjr.org/politics/cnn_circles_the_wagons_on_poll.php).

²² See <http://www.allbusiness.com/government/elections-politics-campaigns-elections/5566056-1.html>.

²³ In its corporate history on its web site, Gallup highlights the initiation of its relationship with CNN and *USA Today* in 1992 but makes no reference to the breakup in 2006 (<http://www.gallup.com/corporate/1357/Corporate-History.aspx>).

²⁴ The first two entries seem to have appeared on the TVNewser web site on March 21, under the postings "Gallup Doesn't Want or Need CNN: Polling Company Ending 14-Year Partnership" (http://www.mediabistro.com/tvnewser/cnn/gallup_doesnt_want_or_need_cnn_polling_company_ending_14year_partnership_34140.asp) and "CNN Refutes Gallup Memo; Says Memo Was Unprofessional & Untrue" (http://www.mediabistro.com/tvnewser/cnn/cnn_refutes_gallup_memo_says_memo_was_unprofessional_untrue_34

[163.asp](#)). The breakup received extensive coverage on the Drudge Report (http://www.drudgereportarchives.com/data/2006/03/22/20060322_000402_flash2cnn.htm), Wonkette (<http://wonkette.com/162039/cnn-and-gallup-breaking-up-is-hard-to-do>), and Pollster.com (http://www.mysterypollster.com/main/2006/03/gallup_cnn_brea.html).

²⁵ See, for example, http://www.mediapost.com/publications/index.cfm?fa=Articles.showArticle&art_aid=33990.

²⁶ The announcement of the new arrangement can be found at <http://www.allbusiness.com/services/business-services-miscellaneous-business/4792684-1.html>.

²⁷ Ibid. There was speculation as far back as April 24, 2006 that ORC would be the new CNN partner, based on this web posting at http://www.mysterypollster.com/main/2006/04/cnn_orc_breakin.html. Mark Blumenthal points out, through a link to the original release of the new results, that CNN took pains to distinguish them from previous results collected with Gallup and *USA Today* (available at <http://i.a.cnn.net/cnn/2006/images/04/24/rel11a.pdf>).

²⁸ See for example <http://www.bloggernews.net/13822> and <http://www.bizzyblog.com/2007/05/26/ny-times-accidentally-does-hillary-clinton-opposition-research/>.

²⁹ See for example <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=18958566>.

³⁰ The content analysis was based upon a search of the iPoll data base at the Roper Center at the University of Connecticut. The data base consists of information about individual questions used in polls, and each entry also includes the characteristics of the poll that includes sponsor, polling firm, sample size and field dates. By searching on the trial heat question (i.e., If the election was held today and Candidate X was the candidate from the Democratic party ...) for polls that were sponsored by CNN, the list of polls was compiled. The information recorded included field dates and sample size, another check that the same poll was recorded.

³¹ See http://www.democraticunderground.com/discuss/duboard.php?az=view_all&address=132x6987312 for an example of such discussions.

³² This is discussed in http://www.pollster.com/blogs/gallups_new_likely_voter_model.php.

³³ At the end of the campaign, the two likely voter models converged to produce an 11-percentage point advantage in both the traditional and expanded versions, available at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/111703/Final-Presidential-Estimate-Obama-55-McCain-44.aspx>.

³⁴ Since no state-level polls are included in the Roper Center's iPoll data base, the web site of RealClearPolitics was used to retrieve this information, at http://www.realclearpolitics.com/Presidential_04/february_3_polls.html and http://www.realclearpolitics.com/Presidential_04/new_hampshire_polls.html.

³⁵ The final release that includes a summary of the Republican data can be found at http://www.unh.edu/survey-center/news/pdf/primary2008_gopprim10708.pdf, while the one for the Democratic primary can be found at http://www.unh.edu/survey-center/news/pdf/primary2008_demprim10708.pdf. In 2004, the Survey Research Center had partnered with Fox News, WCVB in Boston, and WMUR in Manchester (see https://www.unh.edu/survey-center/news/pdf/primary2004_tr12404.pdf).

³⁶ The sources of the data in Tables 2 and 3 were <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2004/special/polls/poll.polls.html> and <http://edition.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/map/polling/polls/index.html>.

³⁷ These are available at <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/map/polling/index.html>. In some cases, there were earlier releases of state poll of poll results for a few of these states.

³⁸ The recent report of the AAPOR Committee to Evaluate the Performance of the Pre-election Polls in the 2008 Primaries contains a section on the wording of the trial heat questions used in the primaries. This raises some questions about how comparable the question wordings might be. The report is available at http://aapor.org/uploads/AAPOR_Rept_FINAL-Rev-4-13-09.pdf.

³⁹ In live television, there is always the possibility of a misstatement of information, and that happened on October 20 when Anderson Cooper misstated a poll of polls finding by asking Bay Buchanan to comment on the fact that the new poll of polls showed “a drop in the number of people that think that McCain would mostly carry out Bush’s policy.” This is the kind of question that would be idiosyncratic to a single poll and for which there could not be any averaged result.

⁴⁰ These data were obtained from http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2008/president/us/general_election_mccain_vs_obama-225.html#polls and the associated links. The information on which polls were used to computer each day’s poll of polls average came from the CNN web site. The notation LV indicates likely voters. There was an indication of the size of the sample of registered voters in the Franklin and Marshall poll but not the number of likely voters.

⁴¹ In recent years, some pollsters have extended the concept of presidential approval to specific policy domains. In the case of the ABC News/*Washington Post* poll, they actually measured approval of Obama’s performance on 13 separate dimensions. Across them, the range of approval levels extended from 41% for his handling of the situation with U.S. automakers to 71% for his handling of the situation in Iraq. I thank Gary Langer of ABC News for pointing me to these data, available at <http://abcnews.go.com/images/PollingUnit/1089a1100Days.pdf>.

⁴² There actually was a 64% approval rating from the poll of polls reported on Saturday, April 24, that was not referenced in the April 29 news story (See <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0904/25/sitroom.01.html>). That probably would not have produced a reference to change across the intervening period.

⁴³ One potential explanation that did not seem to be present was a significant difference in question wording. Four of the surveys asked the question as “Do you approve or disapprove of the way that Barack Obama is handling his job as President?” while three used the form “Do you approve or disapprove of the job Barack Obama is doing as President?” Context does not seem to be an explanation either as the presidential approval question was asked first or second in the six polls that provided a full questionnaire.

⁴⁴ See this posting <http://www.fivethirtyeight.com/2009/04/whigs-federalists-strongly-differ-on.html> for a more detailed discussion of the current relationship between party identification and presidential approval.