

The ‘Nate Silver Effect’ on Political Journalism: Gatecrashers, Gatekeepers, and Changing Newsroom Practices Around Coverage of Public Opinion Polls

Benjamin Toff

Abstract

This article presents findings from 41 in-depth interviews with political journalists, media analysts, and public opinion pollsters in the U.S. These interviews document several trends in how journalists assess and cover public opinion. The article shows (1) a growing interest in and reliance on polling aggregator websites fueled by demands for precise predictions; (2) the erosion of news organizations’ abilities to assert independent gatekeeping standards around individual poll results; (3) concerns about the level of in-house expertise within newsrooms to adjudicate between surveys; and (4) changing attitudes about the importance of gatekeeping around public opinion data. These findings reflect an increasingly complex landscape of opinion data, which conventional news organizations appear ill-equipped to navigate.

Keywords

Political Journalism, Gatekeeping, Public Opinion, Interviewing

Corresponding author

Benjamin Toff, Assistant Professor at the Hubbard School of Journalism & Mass Communication, University of Minnesota.
E-mail: bjtoff@umn.edu

One year before Donald Trump won an unexpected victory in the U.S. presidential election, the *New Yorker* observed that opinion polling “may never have been less reliable, or more influential, than it is now” (Lepore, 2015). New technologies have reduced the expense of surveying large numbers and disseminating results, producing an avalanche of data available almost instantaneously online. The quality of that data varies widely, however, as noted by the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) in their postmortem report on polls and the 2016 election (Kennedy et al, 2017). Sampling and modeling the electorate in a representative manner has become ever more complex and costly, and “large, problematic errors” observed in “key battleground states,” as the AAPOR report concluded, contributed to misplaced confidence in Trump’s certain defeat, even as the ad hoc committee insisted that “a spotty year for election polls is not an indictment of all survey research.”

In the wake of the 2016 election, questions of journalistic practice loom large. How much faith should journalists place in poll results? How do reporters evaluate the quality of individual surveys? These questions have garnered only passing attention from journalism studies scholars. This article is the first to specifically examine the consequences of a growing emphasis on polls on political reporting. Specifically, it focuses on “gatekeeping” around public opinion data—on changing newsroom standards around which polls are deemed fit for publication and attitudes about gatekeeping in a distributed media environment where polling information is widely available online.

Gatekeeping practices around the epistemology of public opinion have relevance not only to pre-election horse-race surveys, which make up most references to polls in the U.S. (Toff, 2016), impacting the tone of candidates’ news coverage (Patterson, 1993;

Rhee, 1996; Sides and Vavreck, 2013) as well as their fundraising (Mutz, 1995). But accurate coverage of public opinion is closely linked to models of representative democracy: surveys hold leaders to account by giving voice to the public and their demands of government (Converse, 1996; Herbst, 1993, 1998; Verba, 1996). Journalists' ability to communicate these preferences and encourage deliberation is at the very core of the public journalism movement (Rosen, 1999), but poll results do not speak for themselves. They must be analyzed, interpreted, and weighed against other available evidence—practices that require varying degrees of specialized expertise.

This article presents findings from 41 in-depth interviews with political journalists, media analysts, and opinion pollsters in the U.S. These interviews, conducted in 2014-2015, document changes in how journalists assess and report on public opinion. Many political journalists now pay close attention to aggregator websites and the ever-growing landscape of quantitative data about campaigns and elections, producing what one informant called a “Nate Silver effect,” or overconfidence in election outcomes rooted in a reliance on quantitative measures of public opinion. I also find evidence of eroding internal newsroom standards about which polls to reference in coverage and how to adjudicate between surveys. Lastly, interviews indicate changing attitudes toward journalists' perceived roles as gatekeepers of public opinion data altogether.

Precision Journalism in the Digital Age

The use of public opinion data in news coverage of American politics has a long history, dating back to the “social survey movement” of the early 20th Century (Anderson, 2017) and popularized by George Gallup and Elmo Roper in the 1930s and 1940s (see Converse, 1987; Herbst, 1993; and Igo, 2008). Its modern incarnation is often traced to

the “precision journalism” movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Meyer, 2002 [1973]), which sought to harness contemporary social science methods for more penetrating and accurate reporting on social phenomenon. This movement took hold as the costs associated with conducting scientific surveys declined precipitously due to advances in computing power and the adoption of telephone interviewing (see Weimann, 1990; Wuthnow, 2015), enabling media organizations to collect their own data, conduct their own analyses, and do so “at a lower cost while gaining greater editorial control over the product” (Traugott, 2009: 4). Polls fielded in-house empowered reporters to become “more influential participant[s] in the political process” (Weaver and McCombs, 1980: 491), countering politicians’ growing use of data for message-testing and issue emphasis (Druckman and Jacobs, 2015).

In recent decades, quantitative public opinion data has become a major focus of political reporting (Butterworth, 2014; Frankovic, 1998; Kreiss, 2016; Rosenstiel, 2005). In October 2012, reportedly half the readers arriving at the *New York Times* website had done so searching for Nate Silver’s polling blog FiveThirtyEight (Simpson, 2012), one of many aggregators to proliferate online (e.g., RealClearPolitics; Pollster.com). Yet even as survey data has become integral to how people think about public opinion, limited research has examined their effect on *how journalists cover politics*. While the tendency toward game-framing (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Lawrence, 2000) and horse-race coverage (Patterson, 2005) has been well documented, the provenance of opinion polls themselves is often taken for granted. Whereas recent scholarship has considered epistemological questions raised by survey data—whether it privileges “certain ways of knowing about the world” (Kreiss, 2016: 70), fueling tensions between “story” and

“data” (Anderson, 2015)—little evidence has been gathered on how *journalists* weigh sources of data against each other and perceive these tradeoffs.

A growing body of complementary research has also begun to explore what Lewis (2015) refers to as “computation and quantification” in journalism, but the use of survey data in newsrooms is only tangential to the emerging class of “programmer-journalists” (e.g., Fink and Anderson, 2014; Parasie and Dagiral, 2013) or “computational journalism” (Coddington, 2015; Kreiss, 2016) which applies mainly to the aggregator and forecasting websites which systematize analysis of survey data from varied sources. But reporting on polls is not a new practice, nor does it necessarily require computational expertise—a characteristic common to most definitions of “data journalism” (see Ausserhofer et al., 2017). Rather than focus specifically on these specialized practices, this study attends to political journalism more broadly.

Two Industries Undergoing Rapid Change

Understanding the relationship between journalists and opinion data requires consideration of changes in both the survey industry and the news media. This section summarizes disruptions in both domains: first, “gatecrashers” in the opinion research field and second, changing conceptions of “gatekeeping” on the news side.

Gatecrashers in the survey industry. The latter decades of the 20th century saw the emergence of a soft consensus about survey research best practices: (1) the widespread use of computer-assisted telephone technology, (2) systematic sampling of selected households across target populations, and (3) the use of specialized, trained interviewers. This consensus has since faced competition from “gatecrashers,” such as automated Interactive Voice Response (IVR) telephone polls and internet-based surveys,

which tend to violate one or more of these practices, often modeling target populations from non-representative panels (Frankovic, 2012; Traugott, 2012). To their proponents, the gatecrashers are innovators, prodding a slow-to-adapt research community clinging to methods seen as increasingly unworkable. A confluence of technical challenges in conventional telephone surveys including low responses rates and regulations against auto-dialling cell phones have made 20th century telephone polls extremely costly (see Traugott, 2012). To their detractors, the gatecrashing firms threaten to undermine the fragile standards the industry uses to distinguish quality research from junk science.

It is beyond the scope of this article to evaluate the claims made in these debates; the point is simply that a lack of consensus has put news organizations in an awkward position. Take, for example, internet-based firm YouGov's partnership with the *New York Times*' site The Upshot in 2014. The move was symbolically charged because of the history of the *Times*/CBS News poll (Connelly, 2014; Frankovic, 2012; Kagay, 2000). While the Upshot's YouGov venture was separate, the partnership drew immediate criticism from AAPOR for normalizing polls "not conducted with scientific rigor" which set "a new—lower—standard for the types of information that other news outlets may now seek to report" (Craighill and Clement, 2014). The statement sparked contentious and ongoing debate among AAPOR members; a recent special issue of *Public Opinion Quarterly* provocatively asked, "Is there a future for surveys?" (Miller, 2017).

Controversy aside, the gatecrashers constitute a growing share of polls in the U.S. as seen in election reports issued by the National Council on Public Polls (NCPPI) (Toff, 2016). Other national news organizations have indeed followed the example set by the *Times*, including NBC News which now partners with SurveyMonkey (Blumenthal,

2016). Half of the pollsters contacted in a survey by FiveThirtyEight predicted that internet polls would overtake telephones as the primary mode used in election polling by 2020 (Bialik, 2014).

In addition to methodological gatecrashers, another overlapping group of industry competitors can be found among the varied organizations that now sponsor surveys—their methods often opaque if disclosed at all. Whereas media companies once sponsored a large and growing proportion of public polls (Ladd and Benson, 1992), cost-cutting has meant that non-media organizations, including private companies or groups with partisan agendas, now account for an increasing share of publicly available data (Toff, 2016). Wuthnow (2015) estimated that by the end of 2012, more than 1200 unique firms and institutions had conducted 37,000 separate public opinion polls in the U.S., most since the 1990s. That number had increased to 48,600 by the end of 2016.¹

Gatecrasher surveys need not be a threat to accurate reporting, but there is little agreement about how even to assess accuracy. Comparing horse-race polls with election outcomes as a proxy for pollster accuracy may only reward modeling assumptions—or, worse, “herding”—over sound science (see Kennedy et al., 2017). Furthermore, such metrics may be a poor gauge of pollsters’ abilities to measure other sentiments such as policy preferences or the views of subgroups of stakeholders. In short, as AAPOR has warned, reporters face an increasingly daunting task in their efforts to “find public opinion data, judge its quality, and then integrate and summarize it into comprehensible conclusions” (Newport et al., 2013: 855).

¹ Author’s tally using the same source used in Wuthnow (2015): an online poll-tracking service available at <http://www.ourcampaigns.com/>.

Gatekeeping in a distributed media environment. Journalists have long played an important yet controversial role as information “gatekeepers” (White, 1950), but social media and other digital forces have eroded conventional media’s monopoly status as curators of information (Singer, 1997). “Journalists now share the stage with a host of other information actors,” as Thorson and Wells (2016: 314) argue in their expanded gatekeeping framework. These changes are particularly acute with regards to coverage of public opinion. Poll results were once practically only available through news coverage, and many news organizations enforced strict editorial standards around polls deemed suitable for coverage, guided by industry groups (Kim and Weaver, 2001).

These standards have steadily evolved with the rising influence of gatecrasher firms,² but gatekeeping practices may be changing for both cultural and economic reasons as well. First, legacy organizations employ a growing number of digital natives who often display a greater willingness to break norms, embrace technology and online information sources (Agarwal and Barthel, 2015; Lecheler and Kruikemeier, 2016). These differences have sometimes produced public tensions, such as when the *New York Times* partnered with FiveThirtyEight in 2012 (see Sides, 2013; Wyman, 2016).

Second, growing attention to polls, regardless of consistent editorial standards, may also be due to commercial influences. As Searles, Ginn, and Nickens (2016: 945) argue, polls sponsored by third parties provide cheap, compelling content: “Results are constantly released, require little newsroom resources, lend an air of objectivity and scientific credibility, and provide an opportunity for time-filling commentary from

² See, for example, the evolution of the *New York Times* standards from 2006 (<http://www.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/politics/pollingstandards.pdf>) to 2014 (<http://www.documentcloud.org/documents/1236691-polling-standards.html>).

political analysts.” Dunaway (2011), likewise, linked newsroom staffing levels to coverage of polls, suggesting that reliance on “secondhand material” may stand in for more labor-intensive coverage. Traugott (2009), too, found that after CNN and Gallup severed their partnership, the network sponsored fewer polls but reported more heavily on averages as “an inexpensive substitute for their own data” (Traugott, 2009: 28). By making use of “easy” content, Traugott argues the network was more prone to errors in interpretation, a problem examined in other research concerning journalists’ inattention to sampling error (Andersen, 2000; Bhatti and Pederson, 2016; Tryggvason and Strömbäck, 2017) or tendency to cherry-pick results (Searles, Ginn, and Nickens, 2016).

The expanding array of online opinion data combined with dwindling newsgathering resources have alarmed many in both the news and survey industries. As Ann Selzer, the pollster behind the respected *Des Moines Register* poll, cautioned (Lee, 2015), “I don’t see anybody saying, ‘This is a bad poll; we’re not going to mention it,’” pointing the finger at aggregators which “throw everything in” and do not distinguish between firms. She added, “You don’t really have many reporters, in my experience, who are doing the work of looking at the methodology.”

Research questions

This study investigates Selzer’s concern and examines how journalists make poll gatekeeping decisions given the pressures of the contemporary U.S. news environment. It focuses three main research questions pertaining to the reporting decisions that shape news content:

RQ1. How do political journalists perceive the value of polls, aggregators, and forecasting sites?

RQ2. How do political journalists assess the reliability of polls and adjudicate between results?

RQ3. How might newsroom norms be changing with regards to gatekeeping around polls?

Study Design and Methodology

The analysis that follows draws on in-depth interviews conducted with 41 political journalists, media analysts, and public opinion pollsters between October 2014 and May 2015. Such qualitative data is critical for illuminating closed-door dynamics that underlie the production of news (e.g., Dupagne and Garrison, 2006; Usher, 2014). Informants were selected across a range of both legacy and digital-born organizations rather than a case study approach, which would have narrowed the study's focus to a particular institution. Using a more varied purposive and snowball sampling approach was needed given the rapidity of change occurring across both the news and public opinion research communities.

Study participants were recruited by identifying and collecting contact information on hundreds of prominent journalists and polling professionals corresponding to four categories: (1) national political reporters and editors with a range of experience levels at newspapers, newswires, network television, cable news, and digital news outlets; (2) "analysts" of polls from online sites and legacy organizations; (3) individuals from news organizations' polling departments; and (4) professional survey researchers from private industry, think tanks, and academic institutions involved in the production of polls sponsored by national news organizations. (See the supplementary online appendix for more information about the sampling procedure.) Out of 71

individuals contacted, 51 expressed a willingness to participate, resulting in 41 completed interviews.³ All but one occurred face-to-face in informants' offices, homes, or public coffee shops.⁴

Because informants were asked to discuss their professional training, recount workplace experiences, and assess the skills of others they have worked with, participants are referenced below using anonymized code names (e.g., "Pollster 2", "Reporter 4", etc.). More detailed sketches of the individuals are provided in a supplementary appendix online, and aggregate characteristics are summarized in Table 1. Journalist informants worked at a range of news organizations including, but not limited to, the three major television networks (ABC, CBS, NBC), national newspapers (New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Los Angeles Times, and Washington Post), and digital-born enterprises (Buzzfeed, FiveThirtyEight, Huffington Post, Politico). Polling professionals included a mix of non-partisan and partisan firms—some of which were employed by presidential campaigns, advocacy groups, and elected officials.

<Table 1 here>

Interviews were semi-structured, covering topics related to news coverage of opinion polls, with some variation depending on informants' unique backgrounds. Individuals were asked to recount past experiences either reporting on polls and politics as journalists and/or creating, developing, and analyzing public surveys as practitioners. Informants were also asked to offer their perspectives on changes over their careers and predictions about the trajectories of their field. Interviews averaged 61 minutes and were

³ Just two people contacted explicitly declined to participate.

⁴ Pollster 10 was interviewed via Skype.

recorded and transcribed verbatim. They were then coded by the author using a “grounded theory” approach (Charmaz, 2006; Tavory and Timmermans, 2009) to identify emergent themes and areas of consensus and disagreement across informants. Additional informants were added throughout the data collection and analysis in an effort to challenge and test nascent theories.

Results

Below I summarize four main themes that emerged across interviews: (1) growing demand for “pinpoint” precision in election forecasts, (2) evolving newsroom standards for coverage of polls, (3) loss of in-house expertise to evaluate polls’ quality, and (4) changing attitudes toward gatekeeping, particularly online.

Striving for ‘pinpoint’ precision

Many of those interviewed valued polls but expressed ambivalence about the role of aggregator and forecasting sites in changing how political campaigns are covered. Journalists often expressed the view that these sites improved accuracy by ensuring that journalists “look at the whole picture” (Reporter 3) and avoid placing too much emphasis on any single result.⁵ Indeed, even journalists who professed little knowledge of surveys or statistics were nonetheless cautious about random sampling error. An experienced journalist who also oversaw political coverage at his news organization viewed aggregators as such an important corrective to journalists’ tendency to “pick the poll numbers they like and disregard the rest” that he had directed his newsroom to cite *only*

⁵ Pollsters were less sanguine about these sites. Pollster 2: “I just don’t know what the value-added is. Take away our polls and they close down.”

aggregated numbers instead of individual results: “I always tell everyone I want to see three polls before I’ll quote them” (Reporter 3).

Many saw imprecision due to sampling error as an inevitable, if frustrating, aspect of reliance on surveys to assess public opinion. “Polling’s pretty good, by and large.” Reporter 3 noted. “It’s a big scandal if they’re off by three or four points on a close race.” But most opinion polls available to the public are not designed to provide greater precision than three or four points in either direction. “It’s not laser surgery on your eyeball here,” Pollster 3 offered. “That’s as good as it gets.” Even when aggregated, other sources of less quantifiable survey error persist, causing tension given demands for precision. “Unfortunately elections are precise counts—when they’re counted right,” Pollster 6 explained. Error in predicting outcomes is used as a proxy for survey forecast quality, creating an expectation of “pinpoint” accuracy. Pollster 6 said journalists “really do expect precision and it comes with the territory: If it’s a number, it’s precise—it’s \$1.39; it’s 34%.” Analyst 4 echoed this concern, recalling “fights with editors” over “whether a two-point lead isn’t a lead,” adding, “the consumers of your data are looking at it and saying, ‘What do we do? Is it close to two points or not?’”

Communicating uncertainty can be difficult without muddying a story altogether. Analyst 2, who has a background in statistics, noted that “straight out of grad school, I thought that would be like my one contribution to the world: turning uncertainty into a strength” but found “it turns out, it’s actually hard.” Analyst 2 joked that “we have a tendency to only stick these uncertainty intervals [on graphics] when we want to claim the opposite” of what’s revealed by the point estimates in the data. Others noted, cynically, there is a tendency to look past known flaws with “shock polls” that don’t

“conform to everything else that you’ve seen” when it is convenient for “big headlines and clicks” (Analyst 5). “There are folks like me and the nerds who are always going to” pay attention to methodological shortcomings, “but as far as the majority of journalists that are out there, people are just going to take the top lines and run with it” (Analyst 5).

Several said they believed the growing availability of survey data online impacted journalists’ expectations about the precision of poll-based forecasts of election outcomes—what Reporter 3 called “the Nate Silver effect.” Because such forecasts were seen as extraordinarily accurate in 2008 and 2012, some expressed concern that it may contribute to an overconfidence in the data. Editor 2 blamed the “incessant desire of social scientists to pretend they’re physicists” when “it’s never going to be that precise.” As Reporter 3 reflected, “It’s almost... from about six weeks out from any election people start saying, ‘It’s over.’”

‘If it comes from someone you trust’

Journalists’ interest in and attention to the aggregators may also impact which polls receive coverage and how newsrooms make gatekeeping decisions around individual opinion poll results. Among those interviewed, variations in expertise meant that how journalists evaluated the quality and reliability of survey data also varied widely. Few possessed formal training in statistics or research design but several said they had amassed on-the-job knowledge valuable for discerning when to be skeptical of results. For example, Analyst 6 said he trusted his own judgment in evaluating polls’ quality despite a lack of “standards per se” at any organization he had worked. He would often “geek out on every single poll,” adding: “I’m always very wary about making judgments based on data that I don’t understand, so I want to know who the pollster is; I

want to know who's paying them; I want to know what the questions are; I want to know what the sample is; I want to ask all these questions." Analyst 6 cautioned, however, that he thought his own attention to detail was unusual.

Others interviewed were forthright about their more "rudimentary" understanding of statistics or survey research design considerations and saw it as a potential area of vulnerability. Reporter 2 admitted, for example, "If you wanted to hoodwink me and you had an institution and a trusted name behind it, you probably could." He added, "I would say probably a lot of reporters at [Reporter 2's newspaper] and other places would say the same thing. You know, if it comes from someone you trust," as in a credible source, it was likely to be deemed reliable. Several journalists interviewed echoed this view, saying they tended to rely more on brand names or other rules-of-thumb when judging the quality of polling, rather than, as Analyst 6 described, interrogating the particulars of each individual polls' questionnaire and sampling design.

The inconsistency of newsroom editorial standards was a frequent topic of discussion. In some cases, such standards existed even where newsrooms had not formally codified them. Reporter 3 estimated that "half our newsroom does not have any understanding of polls, does not understand the wording, the importance of the text, does not understand margin of error, just doesn't understand any of it," which made editorial standards critical. At a minimum: "we should have access to the full questions with all the numbers, [and] we should know who paid for the poll." Others said enforcing such standards had become more difficult "because of competition, because the information is out there" (Reporter 5).

The most evident shift in standards has been with respect to growing acceptance of IVR polling by many major news organizations. Analyst 6 recalled that early reservations had given way due to their success in forecasting elections: “Something that has results? Then fine.” In other cases, even if excluded polls did not receive explicit coverage, reporters still paid attention to them, which could affect editorial decisions about deploying resources. Analyst 1, whose organization still bars IVR polls from coverage, described consulting aggregator sites frequently—with IVR surveys “in the mix”—to assess the competitiveness of a various races. In another example, Analyst 2 joked, “We think [IVR pollster] SurveyUSA owes us a week of our life for worrying about South Dakota”—a 2014 senate race that ultimately proved not to be competitive.

To be sure, aggregators apply gatekeeping standards of their own, although they too disagree about *which* polls to exclude. Some sites exclude pollsters with known agendas or partisan backing, while others, such as FiveThirtyEight, seek to rate pollsters on the basis of their past performance and transform results according to “house effects”—which accounts for aspects of survey design, sampling methodology, and modeling assumptions. Many pollsters interviewed objected to using past performance in election forecasts as a benchmark for quality, noting that it rewarded assumptions—or luck—rather than rigorous methods. Whatever the merits of these standards, the relevant point here is that as these sites have drawn the attention of political journalists, gatekeeping around polls has largely shifted from newsrooms to the aggregators.

Some saw changes in gatekeeping standards as long overdue: one IVR pollster interviewed argued that the exclusion of his firm from coverage by major news

organizations as a “stain that will never be erased.”⁶ More often, informants expressed concern about effects of this change on the accuracy of political coverage: “With data, as with all else, we need to do our job,” Pollster 3 insisted. The same characteristics required in reporting and fact-checking—inquisitiveness, skepticism, sensitivity to the motivations of sources—are also required when handling survey data: “Just like the dispatches from the front have to be evaluated for quality and reliability and the accuracy you’re getting, so do the polls.”

‘The resources to make sense of it aren’t there’

Most of those interviewed were knowledgeable about survey industry changes, and many saw danger ahead in the ability of news organizations to differentiate between reliable information and “manufactured” results. As Pollster 3 noted:

An industry has sprung up to promote the product, or agenda, or point of view of various groups and organizations by getting their stories out through data. Because data are compelling. And you get sort of this, in many ways, a sadly nefarious pact between news organizations desperate for buzzy stories and PR outfits and others who cook up numbers that seem to support those stories with the absence of any rigorous methods. (Pollster 3)

Some expressed concern that the dividing line between reputable “brand names” and questionable sponsored research may also be blurring. Pollster 5, who worked for a large survey firm with a sizable market research division, pointed out that advocacy groups “if they’re smart” will specifically hire respected survey firms to conduct their research to ensure that reporters do not dismiss their results: “that’s their brand equity. They have to produce a poll that withstands scrutiny from the press.” While the research may be

⁶ Pollster 10 suggested that one day people would look back and say his firm is owed “reparations” for how the industry treated it over previous decades, judging his polls “inferior” on the basis of “criteria that others found convenient.”

technically accurate, the agenda behind it ensures that the data highlights a select focus—a particular population’s perspective, for example, or a subject otherwise underplayed in the press. Doing so is not necessarily unprofessional or biased, but in the absence of other relevant opinion data, advocacy organizations are able to capitalize on journalists’ reliance on brand names and the “compelling” quality of polling data to disseminate sympathetic messages.

Additionally, interviews with pollsters further underscored disagreement within the research community itself about what actually constitutes high quality research. Despite growing use of internet-based samples in public opinion polls, there is still no “universally agreed opinion” on “what a representative sample means” (Pollster 4). As Editor 3 said, “With the technological changes, there’s been a whole shift in what poll do you trust? Before... it was all you wanted were landlines. Who has a landline now?” Some felt that confusion over methods is likely a “temporary problem,” that “over time, modeling and big data are going to be really, really good and allow for very accurate estimates” (Pollster 5). But until then, the inability to make reliable inferences from opt-in online panels remains a difficult theoretical hurdle for many polling professionals. As Pollster 5 lamented, “You know, it’s a cliché, but what makes polling or survey research a science is the sample. And once that’s gone, what have you got?”

Many news organizations with polling standards once drew the line at online surveys, but those lines have become fuzzier as industry practices evolved. Analyst 1: “I think we will have to start to change the rules; it’s going to become ubiquitous and there is a happy medium between every kind of junky online poll and no online poll.” News organizations may need to adopt a “fit for purpose” model, where different

methodologies are deemed acceptable for certain purposes, but not others. Analyst 2, from the same news organization, put it this way:

It's like with sources, I mean some of them are sketchy, and that's true with polls too. You know, we quote people sometimes who are sketchy people who have agendas. And still we quote them saying, 'Look, this is a kind of sketchy dude, and he has a dog in this fight. And this is what he says. (Analyst 2)

As standards change, it places a higher burden on news organizations and individual journalists to do due diligence in investigating the limits of the data they encounter and the agendas of their sponsors—burdens that may not be always be reasonable given demands for content and stories likely to “go viral and attract clicks,” as Editor 4 put it.

Almost two decades ago, CBS News' polling director Kathy Frankovic (1998, 158) noted, “Unlike the old relationship with an outside polling firm, the new journalistic polling environment requires individuals responsible for polling to be on staff.” This is arguably more true today given the increasing complexity involved in evaluating survey results and their sampling and modeling assumptions. Yet, many described a lack of in-house expertise for evaluating and analyzing polling data, both for polls sponsored by the news organizations themselves or outside firms, in the rare instance that raw data files are shared. While some organizations that sponsored polling maintain a small team of one or two journalists on staff to write up results and coordinate the writing of questionnaires, the process of sampling, fielding, and analyzing survey data no longer occurs in-house at any U.S. news organization. As Pollster 8 observed, “In this explosion of data, the irony is the resources to make sense of it aren't there.”

‘Twitter is our Ombudsman’

In place of consistent polling standards, several journalists, particularly younger reporters or journalists who work for online publications, expressed distinctly different attitudes about the appropriateness of gatekeeping altogether in contrast to the more conventional views expressed by senior reporters and editors. While these digitally-oriented journalists valued accuracy in reporting, they did not necessarily see gatekeeping as among their responsibilities. Speed and transparency were valued instead.

“Part of it is Twitter. You just want to get stuff out quickly,” Reporter 1 explained. He went on to describe receiving some polling data about a congressional race he was tracking from what he thought was a reputable source. After having “quickly tweeted a link to it,” the results were quickly critiqued by his Twitter followers.

Of course I didn’t actually look at the methodology, and someone pointed out it was email respondents and it was like, it was a statewide poll, and of the people in the actual congressional district it was like 130 people, so people pointed that out on Twitter, and I had to tweet the caveat. (Reporter 1)

Reporter 1 was embarrassed by his “screw up” but later he explained, “in a lot of ways Twitter is our ombudsman. We have left-wingers and right-wingers who follow us, and they’ll call us out.” If readers online could help to decipher the reliability of polling data, all the better.

Analyst 3, who also works for an online news organization, took a similar, if slightly more nuanced, position. When faced with competing poll results from pollsters with different methods or approaches, he said, “What we do is we would report all of them. We would ensure, make sure that the reader knew about all of them.” He added, a place where his online organization can add a lot of value is in helping “guide the readers to understand why these two polls differ and which one we think may be a more accurate representation of what the publics actually thinking,” and because his news

organizations' online readers were generally more highly educated and engaged politically, it was his view that they demanded this level of detail.

Others interviewed, particularly older journalists, disagreed with this approach. "Journalistically, that's just wrong," Reporter 3 told me. "If you doubt the data, why would you tweet it? Why would you use it in any way, shape or form?" Pollster 1, who has conducted surveys for presidents and presidential campaigns similarly, lamented:

Why are you not questioning every poll as rigorously as a report you would get from the Department of Health communications office? Why do you take it as gospel? And report it and tweet it. Without even asking a freaking question?! That's your job. (Pollster 1)

Editor 3, who had the unique perspective of a career that spanned senior editing positions at both an established national newspaper and an online news organization, expressed disbelief about that the lack of gatekeeping standards at the latter. "I told people: There needs to be more discretion about what polls we quote." Without any newsroom standards, "young reporters" especially "would just take the attitude that any poll is a poll and they'd just stick it in. Headlines would reflect the poll, and it could be a poll from an interest group or a bullshit poll."

I just fear we've come to the point, out of laziness and cheapness and sinister forces, that there's not the discretion that there used to be. It risks dominating, helping drive the discussion and the narrative of the campaigns in a way that it shouldn't. (Editor 3)

Even the strictest gatekeeping rules sometimes meet the harsh reality of the digital media environment in which a single set of poll results can drive news virally. Analyst 1 explained that in instances where poll results had clear political consequences, they would likely receive coverage regardless of the methods employed. "YouGov polls on Scotland were driving the stock market during that election," referring to an internet poll

ordinarily excluded according to polling standards at Analyst 1's newspaper. "Well, just to pretend it wasn't happening, you just couldn't do it. So you need to mention them."

Discussion

This study captured several aspects of how contemporary political journalists use poll results in their coverage of American politics drawing on the perspectives of the professionals and practitioners who conduct and report on public opinion data. With regards to RQ1, which asked how journalists perceive the value of polls and poll aggregators and forecasting sites, I find that in a well-intentioned effort to more accurately interpret available data, a reliance on aggregator and forecasting websites has led some journalists to overestimate the degree of precision in results—"the Nate Silver effect" as one of the informants called it. I expand on this point below in more detail. With regards to RQ2, which asked how journalists evaluate the credibility of poll results and make gatekeeping decisions, I find ongoing concerns over shifting and ill-defined standards, with many relying on a mix of "brand" name reputations, limited in-house newsroom expertise, and (increasingly) third-party aggregator websites which make determinations about the reputability of polling data based on their own criteria. Lastly, with regards to RQ3, which asked how norms may be changing with regards to gatekeeping around polls, I found evidence that younger journalists—digital natives—often differed in their views of whether media organizations *should* serve as gatekeepers of poll results in an environment in which information circulates so freely online. Others saw this anti-gatekeeping perspective as further degrading the ability of journalists to independently and accurately report on public opinion.

Although interviews were conducted between 2014 and 2015, the results readily speak to aspects of the 2016 presidential election. Overzealous confidence in pre-election polling forecasts, one manifestation of the so-called “Nate Silver effect,” caused many to feel betrayed by the results—to question the value of opinion research altogether and the journalism that draws on it (Spayd, 2016). Silver (2017) faulted journalists for mistaking probabilistic forecasts for “sure thing” predictions and failing to convey appropriate levels of uncertainty (see also Kennedy et al., 2017). My point here is not to place blame but rather to reveal the shift in journalistic practice and its implications. Many of the journalists interviewed said they paid attention to aggregated polls in order to report more accurately on campaigns, but if doing so comes at a cost of other forms of knowing—often *literal* cost given scarce resources—these tradeoffs must be more explicitly considered. Debates over how to convey proper levels of uncertainty journalistically only point to larger tensions in “precision journalism.” The tools of social science often reveal more questions than answers, more nuanced ambiguity than clarity—which may be at cross-purposes with the sense-making aims of narrative journalism.

Furthermore, debates over uncertainty in forecasting models obscure what social scientists argue is actually most valuable about opinion research: their ability to give equal voice to all segments of the public, including their multitudes of contradictions and areas of disagreement over the proper role of government (Verba, 1996). It is here that the matters explored in this article have pernicious effects on the public’s ability to hear itself—extending well beyond U.S. campaigns and elections. Scientific surveys are among the best available tools for reliably revealing the public’s preferences, but the perceived failure of polls to predict the outcomes of close elections and the ongoing

struggles of journalists to report on opinion data amidst a persistent lack of methodological transparency (Newport et al., 2013) threatens to undermine confidence in opinion research. That makes it easier for leaders to dismiss and ignore the public's concerns expressed through those surveys.

These findings point the way toward future scholarship which might assess the data analysis skills and backgrounds of a more comprehensive cross-section of journalists, but this study also underscores the limits of relying on newsroom expertise alone to improve coverage of public opinion given the distributed media environment. Greater engagement is needed among academic researchers in helping to provide both real-time analysis of opinion data but also clearer guidance on best practices in news coverage—not unlike in coverage of medical research or climate change science. The challenge of interpreting public opinion is a collective one, and scholarship which merely chastises journalists for their shortcomings does not offer a productive path forward.

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Table 1

Summary Characteristics of Informants Interviewed

| | | <i>N</i> |
|--------------------|---|----------|
| Group ¹ | Political Reporters and Editors | 12 |
| | Opinion Commentators and Polling Analysts | 8 |
| | Newsroom Staff Overseeing Media Polling | 9 |
| | Survey Researchers | 20 |
| Partisanship | Partisan (Democratic) | 4 |
| | Partisan (Republican) | 4 |
| | Did Not Identify as Partisan | 33 |
| Gender | Male | 32 |
| | Female | 9 |
| Total | | 41 |

Note. ¹Numbers do not sum to total because some informants belonged to multiple groups.