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A Critique of Internet Polls as Symbolic Representation and Pseudo-Events

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The Internet continues to grow as an information and entertainment medium. Internet growth has implications for the news industry. Twenty-four hour news networks such as CNN and MSNBC regularly encourage viewers of their television programs to visit their Web sites. While visiting news Web sites, visitors are invited to participate in opinion polls. Unfortunately, these online opinion polls are not scientific and have little real news value. In spite of these limitations, news Web sites' Internet polls are often treated as serious topics in broadcast news discussions. This article examines media organizations' Internet online polls and critiques them as instances of symbolic representation and pseudo-events that have arisen largely out of the integration of print, broadcast, and Internet media.

Keywords: Internet; Opinion Polling; Poll; Polling; Pseudo Events; Symbolic; Symbolic Representation; World Wide Web

In November of 2004, InternetWorldStats.com reported that 69% of the United States population was using the World Wide Web (WWW). Demographic data gathered by the Pew foundation suggest that the Internet is used equally by both men and women (Lenhart et al., 2003, p. 6), although men tend to use the Internet slightly more for newsgathering and informational purposes than women do (Fallows, 2004, pp. 18–19). Additionally, a 2004 Pew Research Center study reports that 88% of Internet users have used the Internet to access news Web sites, 15% of Internet users access news exclusively on the Web, and 40% of Internet users gather news both offline and online (Fallows, 2004, p. 23).

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The broadcast and print media have responded to the public's desire for Internet news and entertainment and have migrated content from broadcast and print sources to the WWW (He & Zhu, 2002; Middleberg & Ross, 2000, 2002; Schultz, 2000; Wu & Bechtel, 2002). The academic community is also responding to this trend. Research has examined the number of online newspapers, the number of local broadcast networks with news Web sites, and the similarities and differences between broadcast and print Web sites (Lin & Jeffres, 2001; Middleberg & Ross, 2000, 2002; Stempel, Hargrove, & Bernt, 2000; Wu & Bechtel, 2002). Researchers have also conducted content analyses of online news practices (Chan-Olmsted & Park, 2000; Lin & Jeffres, 2001; Marton & Stephens, 2001; McMillan, 2000; Singer, 2001). However, more questions about the integration of print, broadcast, and Internet news need to be asked.

The purpose of this article is to critically examine the nonscientific Internet polls that appear on the Web sites of major broadcast media outlets. Nonscientific online opinion polls differ greatly from the original vision of public opinion research (to help policy makers gauge public sentiment) and those differences have implications for how citizens understand news and national events. The first section of the article traces the intent of public opinion polling from its roots as a way to inform public policy to its use today as a news and entertainment vehicle. The second section of the article presents two critical frameworks, the "pseudo-event" and the concept of "symbolic representation," to illustrate the entertainment dimension of Internet polling by the news media. The final section of the article conducts a critique of online public opinion polls and raises issues for scholars and teachers of journalism, media studies, and communication.

The Intent of Public Opinion Polling

The use of public opinion polls has changed over the last 100 years (Herbst, 1990, 1998). The history of the poll has been traced by political scientists and communication scholars (cf., Herbst, 1990, 1998; Hogan, 1997; Korzi, 2000; Rubenstein, 1995). For the purposes of this article, however, we trace polling from its original intent as a tool for informing public policy to its current application as a news and entertainment tool.

Polls to Support Public Policy Decisions

Modern opinion polling in the 1900s was both optimistic and cautious. Korzi identified A. Lawrence Lowell's 1913 book, *Public Opinion and Popular Government*, as the "first major book on public opinion by an American" (2000, p. 54). This book describes the balance between a belief in the common person and a need for experts to guide decision making. Walter Lippmann's 1922 book, *Public Opinion*, raised important questions about citizen participation in politics. And John Dewey's, *The Public and its Problems* (1927), examined the public in terms of interactions between people.

According to Herbst, during the 1930s and 1940s, there was a coexistence of both informational techniques for understanding public opinion (letters to the editor, competing news sources, interviews with leaders, etc.) and the development of

today's more formal strategies of public opinion measurement using random sampling and statistical predictions (1990, p. 949). Hadley Cantril, Elmo Roper, and George Gallup emerged as the fathers of modern public opinion polling during the 1930s and 1940s. According to second generation polling theorist Albert Cantril, the philosophical underpinnings of the fathers of polling included a belief that polling was a way to convey the popular will of the people to government (1991). The early pollsters' belief was that regular measurement of public opinion would ensure a government *by the people*. However, as early as 1944, Hadley Cantril noted:

> Within the past decade the field of public opinion research has been transformed . . . the enormous possibilities of the sampling technique used in market research have been exploited by American business. Newspapers and magazine publishers were quick to sense the news value of reports on what the nation thinks. (Cantril, 1944, vii)

Polls as News

Hadley Cantril's 1944 observation is now evident today: polls are often intended to be used as support and evidence for news stories. According to Albert Cantril, six major issues beg the question of whether a newspaper should conduct and report on an opinion poll: (1) judgments of the polls newsworthiness, (2) whether the poll will encourage pack journalism, (3) whether polls influence journalists' ability to make balanced judgment, (4) whether preelection polls inhibit journalists from communicating their messages effectively, (5) whether polls take on a life of their own, and (6) whether tracking polls are overkill (1991, pp. 66–71).[1]

   Interestingly, the broadcast media acknowledge no such constraints on their use of opinion polls. Indeed, introductory/practitioner-oriented texts such as the *Broadcast News Writing Stylebook* (Papper, 1995) and *Broadcasting in America: A Survey of Electronic Media* (Head, Spann, & McGregor, 2001), as well as critical texts used to teach mass communication theory to undergraduates such as Baran's *Introduction to Mass Communication: Media Literacy and Culture* (2001), and Hiebert's *Impact of Mass Media: Current Issues* (1999), are silent on the subject of public opinion polling, or the appropriate use of poll data in broadcast news.

   Today, polls *themselves* have become news. Perhaps not as clear to broadcast audiences is that there *are* specific rules created to ensure that when journalists report the data from polls, they interpret the data accurately. The rules are described in the *Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual*—the *Oxford English Dictionary* of the newspaper business. According to Louis Boccardi, President and Chief Executive Officer of the Associated Press, the mission of the stylebook is to "make clear and simple rules, [and to] permit few exceptions to the rules" (Goldstein, 1998, p. xi). In accordance with the Associated Press's mission of clarity and accuracy, the Stylebook's entry for "polls and surveys" explains that, "Stories based on public opinion must include the basic information for an intelligent evaluation of the results. Stories must be carefully worded to avoid exaggerating the meaning of the poll results" (Goldstein, pp. 161–162).

   The process of polling is rarely value neutral, however. A frequent critique of opinion polls is that they are tools of elites who control the media. As Kornhauser notes,

mass media outlets often fail to create or sustain "a community of value and interest with their audience, [and instead] they substitute organizational and market relations on a national level" (1959, p. 95) for a genuine community. Polls, as one tool of the mass media, have been used to warrant activities by elites such as presidents, political leaders, politicians, city officials, and a host of other ostensibly "neutral" individuals hoping to advance their own political agendas by sponsoring polls to demonstrate support for their activities.

The news media carry some responsibility for the way that polls have evolved. Political polling has become a staple of media coverage. Referred to colloquially as the "horse race," media outlets in the most recent election employed political poll-sters and polling organizations to make predictions about which political candidate is leading in an election or which party is expected to win the most Congressional seats. Although the media have continued to make mistakes from time to time, polling and statistical methods have continued to improve.

Social and political factors influencing election coverage, including voter apathy (Bennett, 1998), mistrust of politicians (Bowler & Karp, 2003; Tucker, 2003; Ulbig, 2001), a decline in party identification (Nie, Verba, & Pertocik, 1993, pp. 235 ff), and an increase in issue voting, especially when the candidates are perceived as essen-tially equivalent on most issues (Niemi & Weisberg, 1993, p. 96), have decreased public interest in elections. Additionally, television viewership of political coverage is down (especially among younger voters), and the major broadcast networks' cover-age of political issues has shifted to punditry and interpretation of what politicians meant rather than what they actually said (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2003; Steele & Barnhurst, 1996).

Research on framing (Entman, 1989) has also suggested that if a question is asked strategically, answers can be predicted. To avoid bias and ensure validity, the best researchers ask questions in a variety of ways. In the age of 24-hour news and instant information via the Internet, however, the intent of news organization's online polls is much different. Media organizations such as the CNN, FOX, MSNBC, and the WSJ (*Wall Street Journal*) create daily polls on their Web sites. The results of these polls become the substance of news stories the next day. Yet, many network/Internet polls are not scientific, reliable, or even random.[2] To date, little attention has been given to Internet polls as content for news stories.

Critical Frameworks to Understand Internet Polling

Hogan (1997) argues that polls, instead of guiding policy makers, have become news events in themselves. Hogan claims that "journalistic imperatives" now have journal-ists demanding more quirky polls about entertainment topics. Instead of seeking information about public policy issues today's polls ask citizens to speculate on the unknown (p. 176). Polls, according to Hogan, substitute for substantive infor-mation about political issues and stifle debate (p. 177). Lipari (1999) claims that polls are a cultural ritual of participation in the symbolic American "community." Lipari identified polling as a form of symbolic ritual that not only plays a role in social

construction of public life but also reaffirms American values of opinion (1999, p. 90). Audiences of poll rituals are also political participants because they see their own interests represented by the poll.

Symbolic Representation

Symbolic representation occurs when organizations, institutions, or individuals create public messages about activities in order to garner public interest or support. As Hinckley explains, symbolic representation refers to a "the highly stylized substitute for the thing it seeks to represent" (Hinckley, 1994, p. 175; cf., also, Edelman, 1964). According to Hinckley, "successful symbolic communication typically evokes what people already agree to or what they would like to think of as true" (1994, p. 175). Hinckley goes on to suggest that symbolic communication allows individuals not to have to ask disturbing questions about their democratic leaders or their policies. Indeed, Donald Marquis, a celebrated newspaper columnist in New York City from 1912 to 1926, put the matter of symbolic representation in perspective, noting: "If you make people think they're thinking, they'll love you; but if you really make them think, they'll hate you" (Ellison, 1991, p. 341).

The Internet news sites using nonscientific opinion polls create a participatory and entertainment dimension to existing news stories. The online opinion poll as an example of symbolic communication is not really about making the polity "think." Rather, the opinion poll gives the visitor a context or a frame of reference in which to place themselves and opinion polls give the media organization's audience something to *think about.*

Today, news sites on the World Wide Web provide visitors with the opportunity to participate in polls, and, vicariously, to become represented in the news. And since the demographics of poll respondents are nearly impossible to verify, and are often not even gathered, the results from such polls are often virtually worthless.[3] Polls-as-stories, however, are entirely consistent with news reporting on the 24-hour news networks where polls are conducted to fill air time and to give newscasters something to talk about. They are one part of involving people in the news. MSNBC.com explains its LIVEVOTES in the following way:

> MSNBC's LIVEVOTES are not intended to be a scientific sample of national opinion. Instead, they are part of the same interactive dialogue that takes place in our online chat sessions: a way to share your views on the news with MSNBC.com and with your fellow users. Let us know what you think.

Consider, for example, a January 3, 2002, CNN poll that asked, "Should military tribunals for terror suspects be open to the public?" (www.cnn.com/POLL/results/24111.content.html). Such a question is clearly an issue of policy to be resolved by the court in question. Until such time as the U.S. Congress sees fit to pass legislation curtailing the power of the courts, individual judges will make such decisions. What the public "thinks" should occur is irrelevant in such a case because as a matter of law their input/opinions will never be considered (or even heard) by the court.[4]

What CNN has done, however, with their question about military tribunals, and similar questions, is to reframe issues of policy as issues of value (opinion). In effect, CNN gives the public the impression that their voice, their opinion, actually matters. By creating symbolic dialogue the media create what Kenneth Burke named "identification" between themselves and their webbed publics (cf., Burke, 1969, pp. 20 f., 55 f.). The issue of whether the public thinks military tribunals should be open to the public, however, is moot. Military courts, as a matter of federal law, are not subject to public scrutiny. What CNN might have legitimately asked would have been "do you think that the proposed military tribunals for terror suspects should be handled by the military (as proposed) or by the U.S. court system?" Of course, legal proceedings handled by U.S. courts are not inherently public events either, but they have the potential to be—unlike military tribunals. Creating clearer poll questions, however, only begs the question. Asking regular citizens about Osama Bin Laden's location will not really generate an answer to the question. But, because of the political and economic constraints of corporate media conglomerates, networks like CNN and FOX are actually asking the question just to provide symbolic representation—to make people think that they are thinking, or to make visitors to their Web site feel like they are part of a larger, public voice.

A more telling example of the symbolic nature of the modern opinion poll is the Wall Street Journal's December 27, 2001, question: "Where is Osama bin Laden" (http://www.WSJ.com)? One can hardly believe that some well-placed White House aide wrote in with the answer. In fact, there *is* an answer to this question. It is a question of fact. Where is bin Laden? "He is in Pakistan..." or "we do not know." But to ask such a question of the public is a bit like asking "will there be a cure for AIDS in the next decade?" Some people (experts) can accurately speculate on an answer to this question and their opinions should matter; however, most people have no idea of the answer—like where Osama bin Laden is—and their "opinions" hardly deserve to be called "opinions." In this case, polls and public responses are mere speculation. Media outlets use Internet polls to create pseudo-events and then use these pseudo-events to frame "real" news stories.

Pseudo-events

Writing before the growth of 24-hour news networks and the Internet, Daniel Boorstin claimed that as a society Americans have grown increasingly extravagant in their expectations. "When we pick up the newspaper at breakfast, we expect—we even demand—that it bring us momentous events since the night before" (1972, p. 3). Boorstin goes on to suggest that Americans "are ruled by extravagant expectations: ... *Of what the world holds* ... [and] *Of our power to shape the world*..." (pp. 4–5, Boorstin's emphasis). Through our wealth, technology, literacy, and progress, Boorstin explains that citizens believe anything and everything is possible, including "the contradictory and the impossible" (p. 4). When the world falls short of expectations, people pay others to help create and maintain the illusion. When there are no heroes, the media creates them. When there is no news, the media invents some news.

The need for more novel and continuous news has transformed the nature of the news business from merely reporting the goings-on in the world to that of *creating* newsworthy events. News is no longer something that happens, news is what the media make happen. Boorstin calls the phenomenon of news creation the "pseudo-event" (1962, 1972).

According to Boorstin, a pseudo-event is a "happening" that possesses four characteristics: (1) Pseudo-events are planned, planted, or incited events (not spontaneous)—an interview rather than a train wreck or an earthquake (1972, p. 11). (2) Pseudo-events are "planted" primarily (though not exclusively) for the immediate purpose of attracting media coverage and are arranged for the convenience of the media (p. 11). (3) Pseudo-events are ambiguous—they are not about reporting "news" the way a reporter might cover a fire or an assault. The link between reality and the event is ambiguous. That is, pseudo-events (like interviews) are contrived—pseudo-events "happen" in the sense that an interviewer really talks to an interviewee, however, pseudo-events do not "happen" in the way that a fire does (p. 11). And finally, (4) pseudo-events are intended to be self-fulfilling prophecies (p. 12). The media creates reality by defining it into existence. As Boorstin suggests of a hypothetical hotel's 30th-anniversary celebration: "by saying that the hotel is a distinguished institution, actually makes it one" (p. 12) in the minds of the public.

The modern pseudo-event played out in online opinion polls has been transformed in recent years. According to Grann the pseudo-event has been part of politics for years: "Politics has always had the whiff of a con game, an elaborate effort to make the artificial seem real" (1999, p. 18). "But," Grann continues, "whereas politicians once used pseudo-events to garner the attention of the press, the press today increasingly generates its own artificial news" (p. 18). The pseudo-event has become a staple of contemporary news coverage. According to Asher:

> The latest example of a pseudo-poll is the online survey on the Internet. Many businesses, media outlets or other organizations invite visitors to their Web sites to participate in online surveys. Like other pseudo-polls the online survey may generate thousands of responses, but it is not a valid survey because respondents self selected themselves to participate. (1998, p. 14)

Boorstin's (1962) framework is useful to understand how the proliferation of news (network television, radio, and now cable television and the Internet) and financial pressures (increased broadcasting and production costs) further drive the need for more news. According to Boorstin, the pseudo-event has two underlying goals: the creation of more news to meet the increasing demand, and the generation of revenue by increasing consumption of news programming.

Boorstin argues that we are becoming flooded with pseudo-events (1962; cf., also, Sproule, 1988). Organizations send out press releases to laud their products and services. Politicians and other public figures hold news conferences even when they have little new information to share, and now, media outlets have begun to contribute to the deluge of pseudo-news by contributing their own in the form of opinion polls, interviews, and debates.

Although Boorstin first discussed the concept of pseudo-events in 1962, his words are even more prophetic today. The American public has special editions of the news, 24-hour news channels, and interactive news available at the press of a button or the click of a mouse. In this age of pseudo-news and symbolic representation, now, more than ever before, there is a need for *real* news.

A telling example of how citizens actually perceive opinion polls as "real events" is the perception by many that the final poll numbers on CNN's QUICKVOTE or MSN's LIVE VOTE actually have an impact on policy decisions. Many people with interests in political decisions and public policy try to manipulate the results of online polls. Listservs and Blogs regularly concern themselves, minute-by-minute, with the results of online polls. Members of listservs encourage other members to vote on personalized issues.

The use of the Internet to exert pressure on people to participate in polls that are essentially "irrelevant" is not trivial. Many people regularly participate in online opinion polls with some polls garnering over 200,000 votes. Consider Rania Masri, for example, who in 1999 wrote to fellow listserv members that, "CNN is taking a poll based on France's announcement today [about sanctions], and the results are NOT running in the right direction.... PLEASE VOTE!" (<http://www.casi.org.uk/discuss/1999/msg00048.html>, author's emphasis). Similarly, another post about gay marriage reads:

> Ready for another poll? Go to CNN and scroll down to nearly the bottom of the page. You'll see "Quick Vote" on the bottom right with this question, "Should same-sex marriage be legal?" Right now the opposition is ahead—61 percent to 39 percent—so take a moment to register your opinion. (robyn g, July 14) smacktheweasel.com/2003_07_01_smacktheweasel_archive.html

And again, from a series of 2004, preelections posts by a conservative political listserv known as "Free Republic," responding to a CNN QUICKVOTE, Free Republic sent out a series of messages.[5] More than a dozen members responded over the course of a few minutes. "Folks, a good Freeping [response from the group, Free Republic] of this Quick Poll will assist in demoralizing John Kerry voters. Normally, I donm't [sic] respond to CNN.com, bu [sic] this is an exception, [sic] Need your help immediately!!! (JLAGRAYFOX)." Other responses from members over the course of a few minutes include comments such as "I just voted and the total number for bush [sic] remained the same (jim from cleveland)." "I just voted and the 'no influence' total remained the same (Smokin' Joe)." "same [sic] with me ... i [sic] voted and the results are exactly the same .... (kizzdogg)." "Don't trust this poll. It is funny that it stayed the same since the first one voted? (Flightmom)." "Write to Fox News. Let it be known that CNN is cheating, trying to influence the BLD effect on the election (RedRepublic)." "I voted at 12:40 and the totals didn't change from what you posted...!!! Hey, does anyone think CNN might be rigging the results? (Tommy-Dale)."[6] Clearly, many Internet users believe that online polls actually shape news coverage, public policy, or, at the very least, public perceptions of issues.

CNN.com's use of opinion polls is a good example of opinion polls as pseudo-events. CNN.com has what appears to be a permanent polling section on its Web site. Each day a national story is linked to a poll question and a link is placed at the bottom of the actual news story to the poll. The layout of the Web page is such that the story appears at the top of the page and poll results appear at the bottom. Polls are phrased as forced choice questions requiring visitors to select one of two choices. Visitors must vote before they can view the results. The results of the poll are displayed with a tiny disclaimer indicating that the poll is not scientific.[7] Although CNN provides a disclaimer, CNN's actions suggest the polls *are* news-worthy because the news organization places links to real news stories next to these nonscientific polls. Moreover, the news organizations dedicate airtime on their nightly broadcasts announcing poll questions, encouraging participation, and reporting poll results.[8]

Take for example CNN.com's poll for January 19, 2002: "Is Osama bin Laden dead or alive?" (http://www.cnn.com/POLL/results/36041.content.html). The results indicate that 19% of the respondents ($n = 20,423$) thought he was dead, and 81% of the respondents ($n = 84,790$) thought that he was alive. The poll was linked to the story "Pakistan's Musharraf: Bin Laden probably dead" (http://www.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/asiapcf/south/01/18/gen.musharraf.binladen/index.html). The bin Laden story was reported on CNN's news channel as a running ticker on the bottom of the television screen on the same day. The text accompanying CNN's stories often encourage viewers to log onto the Web site for "more information."[9] Viewers who saw the running ticker on the television station and then decided to visit the Web site for more information found the QUICKVOTE poll next to the aforementioned news story.

Do Internet opinion polls meet the criteria for pseudo-events? Based on Boorstin's criteria, the answer is "yes." First, the polls are planned rather than spontaneous. Second, the poll questions are designed to be supplements to more traditional forms of news. Third, the relevance of "opinion" questions is ambiguous. Opinions do not change policies nor do opinions change issues of fact. But expressing opinions makes people feel validated. Although poll questions often do not represent the reality of events, polls do provide symbolic representation. Finally, Internet polls are designed to be self-fulfilling prophecies. By participating in, or viewing, poll results, visitors reify the events in question—the poll makes the question newsworthy.

What makes the Osama bin Laden example a pseudo-event is that public opinion has absolutely no bearing on the reality of the issue. Whether Osama bin Laden is alive or dead has nothing to do with opinion; whether bin Laden lives or dies is a question of fact, not opinion. As Harrison (1995) explains, the misuse of opinion polls in issues of fact is not limited to Internet polls. Opinion polls are quite regularly misused in the reporting of science and health information despite the fact that they may meet the Associated Press requirement for the use of opinion polls. Additionally, the bin Laden poll helps CNN.com to fulfill increasing demands for content, contributes to the bottom line on the Web site by encouraging more consumption of news and provides visitors with symbolic representation in news events.

Critique of the Media's Use of Opinion Polls

Because the nonscientific opinion poll is conducted extensively on the Web, this critique will focus on opinion polls use on the Internet by cable and broadcast news sources.[10] What we show through our critique is that Internet opinion polls are used primarily as tools to increase site "stickiness"—that is, to keep visitors on the news Web site. The current use of opinion polls as "conversational (or rhetorical) questions" is understandable in light of the constraints of the broadcast and electronic media. However, opinion polls are not "news" as most U.S. citizens might describe news but instead are used as mere conversational tools.

Nonscientific opinion polls are entertainment tools. The public's opinion as to the location of Osama bin Laden is not solicited to shape more responsive government policy but to make respondents feel as if other people care about what they have to say—as symbolic representation. More than how Internet opinion polls make individuals feel, however, is the fact that polls also serve a framing function whereby "news" stories are given legitimacy by their relationship to polls—even when the polls are not scientific.

Across the globe, and in the United States in particular, the "nonscientific" opinion poll has become a staple tool of 24-hour news networks and Internet news sites.[11] Major national broadcast news networks and local affiliates occasionally mention their Web sites and utilize poll data. However, because most local and national broadcast networks only need to produce 30 minutes to an hour of news coverage a day, local broadcast news does not need to create pseudo-events in the form of polls to fill airtime.[12] Indeed, when news about the weather, sports, latest international disasters, and state and federal government are factored into a typical news hour, a network requires very little actual content in the form of "hard news." By contrast, the 24-hour news networks (CNN, FOX, MSNBC) must constantly search for programming content and tend to have a greater need for "soft news" to fill in the gaps between their regular news and "editorial" segments.[13]

From Television to the Internet

One outcome of vertical integration and consolidation in the news industry is that television news content has migrated over to news organization's Internet sites. Broadcasters are adapting to the growing competition in the entertainment industry by creating a presence in cyberspace. The logic of the Internet, however, is primarily text based, in spite of all of the hype over streaming audio/video and graphics (Kent, 2001). Although the hardware of the Web theoretically allows for a media mix not unlike television's with moving pictures, sound, and text, in practice (because of the constraints of bandwidth and the fact that many users do not have the most up-to-date technology), the 24-hour news channels' Internet sites more closely resemble *The New York Times's* Web site than their own cable television broadcasts. Broadcast news Web sites tend to rely heavily on text and are rarely live.

Essentially then, what has occurred with television's adaptation of the Internet has been for a *broadcast* medium (grounded in principles of entertainment) to transform itself into a *print* medium (grounded in principles of accuracy and thoroughness).

What has been created has been a hybridization of both media. Most 24-hour news station Web sites offer little depth of coverage and rely on the ''whirling, flaming, spinning logo'' of form over substance, presence over content (Kent, 2001). Since the ultimate goal of the 24-hour news service Web sites such as CNN.com or FOXnews.com is to sell advertising, the fact that they are light on content is hardly surprising (cf., Kent, 2001; Kent & Taylor, 1998). To compensate for their lack of depth, broadcast news Web sites draw upon tried-and-true techniques of entertainment such as the opinion poll—the support for the pseudo-event. Visitors are led to believe that their presence on Web sites serves more of a purpose than selling pain-relievers and automobiles (symbolic representation).

In the long run, negative consequences from the evolution of the opinion poll into just another pseudo-event are likely. The merging of news and entertainment, in combination with the media's emphasis of image over content may contribute to what Jack Fuller, President of Tribune Publishing Company, calls a crisis of inauthenticity. Fuller argues that our appetite for image and pseudo-events ''destroys expectations the way a steady diet of junk food destroys the heart or alcohol the liver'' (2002, p. 5). And, the use of nonrandom Internet polls as content for news broadcasts delegitimates polls that *are* scientific and useful for policy decisions. Indeed, broadcast news networks often juxtapose scientifically gathered polls with the results of Internet polls. This practice gives a nonrandom Internet poll the same status as the scientifically gathered one.

An example of an Internet poll being juxtaposed with genuine, scientific, poll-data occurred on April 14 (2004) when MSNBC's Web site ran a story in the ''News/ Politics'' section: ''Poll: Bush vulnerable, Kerry not benefiting'' (http://www.smnbc. msn.com/id/4739326/#survey). The story explains that in a recent poll, Bush and Kerry were running at nearly identical levels (49% Kerry, 48% Bush), but that Bush still lead Kerry on ''intensity of feelings.'' What appears next to this story, however, is a box for MSN's LIVEVOTE that asks, ''If the presidential election were held this week, who would you vote for?'' As of about noon of that day (April 14, 2004) about 207,000 people had cast votes—59% in favor of Kerry. The disproportionate numbers between MSNBC.com's LIVEVOTE and the scientifically conducted survey beside it, (accurate to within $+/-3\%$), actually takes credibility away from the scientific survey. But credibility can only be lost if the inconsistency is seen from the logical standpoint of arguments and propositions (cf., Ellison, 1996, pp. 209–223, 374–381). From the standpoint of logical argument, the ''live vote'' acts as a ''red herring.'' But from the standpoint of a pseudo-event, both events are independent of each other and only act to give the visitor to the Web site a way to participate in democracy.

As mentioned previously, there is another serious concern with the way that opinion polls are providing symbolic representation. Participation in Internet and media opinion polling provides an illusion of actual participation in the nation's political discourse. As Duerst-Lahti and Verstegen suggest, ''Symbolic representation is based upon a system of shared values, functioning as a two-way correspondence, agreement between the ruler and the ruled'' (1995, p. 217). Thus, legitimate public opinion polls seek to represent a nation's citizens by providing snapshots of public sentiment

toward policies, political candidates, or values useful to politicians and decision makers. When the nature of opinion polls is changed such that the primary value is entertainment, their value to representatives and policy makers becomes illusory. Unfortunately, as Edelman suggests, although *experts* in polling can determine the difference between a "properly conducted sample survey and a convenience poll, many in the media and the public cannot" (2001, p. 441).

Respondents to opinion polls recognize that they have the ability to participate in the news dialogue by contributing their opinion. Having and expressing an opinion is valued in the United States (Lipari, 1999). The problem comes when individuals start believing that their *opinion* matters on questions of *fact*. Polling citizens on their opinions of government policy, antiterrorist measures at airports, or taxes, *are* issues for which citizens can have opinions. When issues of *opinion* are treated as newsworthy, however, individuals begin to believe that opinion actually matters on such issues. In effect, polling individuals on "guesses" serves to deflect public debate from genuinely newsworthy issues. Broadcasters have influence over what is discussed as part of the public agenda. When media outlets focus the attention of visitors to their Web sites on trivial issues, the public is deprived of the means to make informed decisions and to learn about important policy issues.

Conclusion

The purpose of this essay is not meant to devalue the use of the Internet by professional pollsters. Today, there exists a cadre of professional, reputable, well-intentioned polling organizations. Their Internet polls use very sophisticated techniques to reach their target publics and often to reach a segment of the audience not generally available with traditional polling methodology using landline telephones. Take for example the many excellent polls conducted by the Pew Research Center, Harris, and Gallup that use random sampling, replication, multiple callbacks throughout the day (up to 10), callbacks on refused poll completion, etc. (http://peoplepress.org/reports/methodology.php3). Modern polling organizations like the Pew Research Center use a variety of methodologies including focus groups, telephone surveys, and even Internet polls to determine public opinion on a topics of interest. The focus of our critique is to clarify how nonscientific Internet polls conducted by new organizations can equate entertainment with "news."

Nonscientific Internet polls illustrate the fundamental transformation that has taken place in how news is constructed. What the 24-hour broadcast news Web sites do is to blur the lines between what is news and what is entertainment. The role played by the opinion poll in contemporary news coverage is similar (but with an appearance of legitimacy) to that played by streakers in the 1970s, psychics in the 1980s, and stories about UFOs in the 1990s—they were entertaining.

Scholars, journalists, teachers, and, by extension, citizens should be critical of the role that these nonscientific opinion polls play in political dialogue. Not only do Internet polls "create news," they also create the illusion that *uninformed* public "opinion" has a legitimate role in policy making.[14]

Networks ask television viewers (or visitors to their Web sites) for their "opinions" both to keep them on the Web site, and so that those opinions might be used as the basis for a news story later in the day, or the next day. Network opinion polls are pseudo-events that serve to give content-starved, round-the-clock broadcast networks and Web sites something to talk *about*. Opinion polls are the "talk radio" of the new millennia. But talk radio has never been news and that is where the broadcast media need to be clearer. By reporting "numbers," the broadcast media give the impression that polling content has news value, which is frequently not true. In order to counteract the attempts by the broadcast news media to co-op the standards of print rigor that have developed over the last 50 years, professionals need to be more vigilant in our efforts to teach media literacy and subject Internet news to critical scrutiny.

Polling in general, and Internet polling in particular, has a place in society. However, as long as "opinion polls" are structured so that they allow people to "*express their opinions*" rather than "*measuring opinion*" or public sentiment on social, political, policy, and other issues, the Internet poll will continue to be nothing more than a tool used by media conglomerates to increase advertising revenue and to persuade people to visit their Web sites.

Notes

[1]   Cantril describes polls as primarily tools of democracy. A similar set of criteria are utilized by the Associated Press. The Associated Press views "opinion polls" as electoral tools—or support for stories. The AP's polling criteria are meant to identify biased information and to assist in the reporting of "newsworthy" content.

[2]   Media literacy research suggests that the average citizen is not very critical about what s/he reads, watches, or hears. (cf., *Journal of Communication*, special issue on media literacy, 1998, 48[1]).

[3]   The exact demographics of Internet users are difficult to estimate. Research by the Pew Research Center indicates that 75% of Internet users are white, 11% are black, and 10% are Hispanic; 23% of Internet users are 18–29 years old, 42% are 30–49 years old, 20% are 50–64 years old and 15% are 65 years or older; in terms of income, 28% of Internet users earn less than $30,000 a year, 21% earn $30,000–$49,999 a year, 14% earn $50,000–$75,000 per year and 18% earn more than $75,000; in terms of education, 14% are not high school graduates, 35% are high school graduates, 25% have some college education, and 26% have college and graduate school degrees (Lenhart et al., 2003, p. 6).

Most Internet users have accessed news and other information via the Internet. As Fallows reports, 88% of Internet users have used the Internet to gather news online (2004, p. 23). Spooner provides data on racial groups use of the Internet noting "34% of Asian-American users get the day's news online during a typical day, compared with 22% of whites, 20% of Hispanics and 15% of African-American Internet users" (2001, p. 2).

[4]   We are not suggesting that what the public believes is unimportant, rather that some issues are decided by experts in venues beyond public opinion. The military tribunals question was simply not a good question because military tribunals are not public events and not subject to the laws that constrain civilian courts.

[5]   All posting occurred between 9:06 and 9:43 a.m., October 30, 2004 (www.FreeRepublic.com).

[6]   Software products such as Survey Manager are available to create and to tabulate online surveys. News organizations use this type of software to disregard double voting and it also

stops accepting new votes at designated times. As this series of posts illustrates, however, many Internet users are not clear about how online polls work in spite of the fact that online broadcasters like CNN and MSNBC post information about how they not scientific, and how they are designed to minimize repeat voting.

[7]   "This QuickVote is not scientific and reflects the opinions of only those Internet users who have chosen to participate. The results cannot be assumed to represent the opinions of Internet users in general, nor the public as a whole. The QuickVote sponsor is not responsible for content, functionality or the opinions expressed therein" (www.cnn.com/POLL/results/24111.content.html).

[8]   CNN MONEYLINE's Lou Dobbs presents a nightly quick vote on an economic or business topic. A transcript from his June 13, 2002, program exemplifies how Dobbs integrates the nonscientific poll into the content of the show.

> Well, turning to tonight's MONEYLINE quick vote, the question tonight is: Are you surprised that no one has been charged with a crime eight months after the Enron investigation began? Please cast your vote at: cnn.com/moneyline. And, of course, we will have the results later here in the broadcast. . . .
>
>   Now a reminder, our question tonight on the MONEYLINE poll.. . .Cast your vote at cnn.com/moneyline. The results will be coming up in a just a matter of minutes. . . .
>
>   Now, let's take a look at the results of our MONEYLINE poll tonight. Tonight's question: Are you surprised that no one has been charged with a crime eight months after the Enron investigation began?
>
>   And here are the results. Yes, 66 percent are surprised. And no, 34 percent.
>
>   CrossFire begins in a few minutes. There are always surprises there.

[9]   No more information was available on the Web site than what was already being reported on the network broadcast. The visit to the Web site, however, serves to increase "hits" and allows the news site to charge more money to advertisers for advertisements that appear on the Web site. Little has changed. As Roy Megary, Publisher, *Toronto Globe and Mail*, suggested: "By 1990, publishers of mass circulation daily newspapers will finally stop kidding themselves that they are in the newspaper business and admit that they are primarily in the business of carrying advertising messages" (Bagdikian, 2000, p. 195). And as Jay T. Harris, former publisher of the *San Jose Mercury News*, remarked in a speech at Harvard University, following his March resignation (May 16, 2001), "at some point one cannot avoid asking what is meant by a good business? What is good enough in terms of profitability and sustained year-to-year profit improvement? And how do you balance maintaining a strong business with your responsibilities as the steward of a public trust?" Harris resigned because he believed that the newspaper's cost-cutting measures would diminish the newspaper's ability to provide effective journalism (http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/presspol/publications/pdfs/harris.pdf).

[10]   It is worth noting that radio stations have been conducting a form of nonscientific "opinion polling" for decades via radio call-in shows where listeners can express their opinions. The results of caller opinions are often tabulated and reported the next day as tools to generate conversation—a strategy not unlike the contemporary Internet opinion-polls. The opinion polls currently being conducted on the Internet are similar to radio polls in a number of ways, especially in how they are used to attract listeners by offering an avenue through which listeners can express their opinions.

[11]   From a global perspective the use of opinion polling as a staple of news making varies widely. Some countries like Singapore's MSN affiliated station utilize opinion polls as aggressively as U.S. news Web sites. Other nations like the Australian broadcasting Corporation (ABC), for example, utilizes public opinion questions as a means to stimulate public debate such as a

recent question about salary caps in sports (http://www.abc.net.au). The British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) Web site also has polls but they are not a prominent aspect of the site. Additionally, BBC polls are framed much more obviously around entertainment issues: UFOs, ''Dr. Who,'' etc. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation has no opinion polls on its national Internet site but some regional sites do such as the Montreal's CBC affiliate (http://www.cfcf12.ca), and Canadian Business Television's Report of Business (ROBTV). Finally, other countries' new organizations such as Africa (http://www.channelAfrica.org), France (http://www.France2.fr), Greece (http://www.ert.gr), Ireland (http://www.rte.ie/news), Jordan (http://www.jrtv.com), and Russia (http://www.tvc.ru) do not employ online surveys.

[12]   Although, as noted, local news broadcasts typically do not need a lot of help filling their airtime, many also utilize polls as the basis for stories. Polling is relatively inexpensive (almost free if conducted online) and can be used as a cost-cutting measure or to fill airtime on slow news days.

[13]   ''Soft news'' and ''editorial'' are emphasized here because a substantial portion of the editorial content on the cable news networks functions as entertainment not as informed critique or analysis.

[14]   Although the purpose of this article is to critique non-scientific opinion polls, the authors conducted a convenience sample of 80 college students about their use of these polls. The pilot study consisted of a survey with several fixed response and open-ended questions asking them how often they participated in online surveys, why they participated, whether they thought their opinions mattered, etc. Responses to the survey were consistent with the rationales offered in this article for why citizens participate in online surveys. The authors are currently conducting a more extensive scientific survey based on this pilot study.

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