Media-Sponsored Polls: Opinion Reporters or Opinion Formers?

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MEDIA-SPONSORED POLLS:
OPINION REPORTERS OR OPINION FORMERS?

BY

SUSAN M. MCKINNEY
B.S., St. Joseph's University, 1981

THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Communication in the Graduate Studies Program of the College of Arts and Sciences University of Central Florida Orlando, Florida

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

For Mom and Dad. Without your support, your faith and your encouragement I would have long ago stopped believing I had the power to succeed. This work is offered to you in thanks, knowing that I could never hope to repay the gift of your love.
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INTRODUCTION

A Brief History of Public Opinion Research

The acknowledgement of public opinion as a social force has motivated the masses and inspired awe in leaders since the higher middle ages. But the phenomenon of public opinion or "the mind of the people" had been cited by philosophers and historians since antiquity. According to Benson (1968), over two-thousand years ago the historian Thucydides organized the classic History of the Peloponnesian War around three themes: the distribution of public opinion, the formation of public opinion and the impact upon government decisions of public opinion about the war and related events.

Yet Thucydides' concept of public opinion was not as we have come to know it. The ancients regarded the mind of the people as a specter and those who could divine the mind of the people had mystical or supernatural properties (Davidson, 1957). Leaders, those who understood the people well enough to move them to action, were not merely clever manipulators—they were divine.

In the latter part of the middle ages the concept of public opinion took its human form. As the people of the western empires stirred from the somnolence of feudalism public opinion expressed itself in riots, insurrections and revolutions. The rising spirit of popular rule was carried through the Renaissance and into the early modern period of history on the maxim "vox populi vox dei." The concept of public
opinion had changed: no longer was it "the mind of the people," that mystical notion which conveyed the passive and static state of human belief. Public opinion was now the "voice of the people," irrepressible, unmistakable, capricious and compelling. "The voice of the people is the voice of God" and with that statement divine rule had fully, perhaps permanently shifted from the leader to the people.

In no other nation was the principle of common rule more religiously applied than the United States. Because this new nation had no natural aristocracy, the early leaders acknowledged that their origins were in the people, their power was from the people, hence their loyalties belonged with the people. Liberty was the bond between leader and people which allowed the young democracy to thrive. Freedom to legislate according to one's conscience provided leaders the means for preserving the rights of all citizens from destructive forces within and without the state. Freedom of speech, assembly, petition and press provided the people channels for voicing public opinion in a peaceful manner.

It is little wonder, then, that the nation which placed such importance in public opinion should become the center for the development of modern opinion polling. As Wilson (1942) has observed, even in the earliest days of our nation "The maxim that all government rests on opinion became in 1788 in its way as venerable as vox populi vox dei. Those who framed our system of government knew both sayings, but they stressed the former more than the latter." Citing evidence that more than a century before scientific polling methods were developed and
employed to gauge public opinion the concept of measuring the strength of public opinion was important to the earliest Americans, Wilson continues by quoting an early American journalist:

"If it be true that all government rest on opinion" we read in The Federalist, No. XLIX, "it is no less true that the strength of opinion in each individual, and its practical influence on his conduct, depends much on the number which he supposes to have entertained the same opinion."

In the earliest years of the nation, perhaps the most common way for the people to provide frequent feedback to its leaders and to learn what neighbors thought about important issues of the day was through the American press. When communities were small (and legislators were less denizens of Washington and more local heroes) the newspaper provided an adequate and, in most cases, accurate profile of public opinion on issues of immediate interest. Even into the 19th century, journalists were able to assess local sentiment on public issues through man-in-the-street interviews, open forums and editorial policies which frequently mirrored the values of the community.

But as communities began to expand and diversify, as government figures became less identifiable as the champions of the common people and more aligned to the thinking of monied interests, the press in America grew more sophisticated and progressive in its vision, more national in its scope. No longer were journalists content to purvey mere local events. The press of the late 19th century discovered a new vocation: that of public conscience. The "reformer journalists" like Riis, Tarbell, Steffens and Replier were less concerned with expressing local public sentiment as a source of information as they were with
using information as a means of influencing public opinion on national social issues (Adolorata, 1965). It was in this climate of increased awareness of new social sciences like sociology and the rise of the 20th century empiricists that the press encountered a method of acquiring information about social forces and for measuring that elusive quality, public opinion. By the 1920s, journalists began using still-crude public opinion research methods as a means of advancing the reporting of social forces beyond speculation, toward quantification.

As Cantril (1980) has noted, the early relationship between public opinion researchers and journalists was based not simply upon journalists' need for an expanded information base. Early pollsters believed that journalism was a safe refuge for their growing field where freedom from political influences and special interests was ensured under the First Amendment. Ultimately, polling and journalism became interdependent fields. Journalism affected both the kinds of polls which were conducted and the way poll results were interpreted and reported. But polling radically influenced journalism by creating a new kind of reporting, poll watching. Thus, the dilemma which has faced journalists and pollsters alike since the early part of this century and which still presents the principle challenge to both fields is how to "balance what is newsworthy with what is considered a valid measure of public opinion" (Cantril, 1980).

Soon after the press began publishing the results of independent and self-sponsored polls it became apparent that surveys were not the
foolproof barometers of public opinion they had first seemed. Sampling methods of the 20's, 30's and 40's were still quite crude; even the social scientists did not fully understand the concepts of sampling error with the result that most national polls oversampled and paid little attention to systematic bias in the selection of samples. The infamous pre-election poll conducted by Literary Digest in 1936 sampled over two million citizens nationwide, but selected its sample from lists of automobile registration and telephone books—clearly (in the light of retrospect) a non-random sample in that period of history (Oskamp, 1977).

The enormity of the Literary Digest blunder rocked the faith of journalists and readers who had come to regard the polls as powerfully predictive. Indeed, the Literary Digest, which had published correct predictions of election outcomes for 20 years prior to the Landon-Roosevelt race, went out of print two years later. The backlash might have caused the entire field of opinion research to lose credibility as a science had it not been for the efforts of several young "commercial pollsters," Gallup, Crossley and Roper who had accurately predicted a Roosevelt win in 1936 using the quota sampling methods they had refined. By defining the population of probable voters as members of various racial, sex, age, geographic and economic sub-groups and by sampling respondents whose characteristics correspond to those on the national population of probable voters on these several dimensions, these researchers learned they may avoid the most obvious sources of systematic bias (Oskamp, 1977).
Quota sampling redeemed the polling profession. Journalists were once again willing to publish results; politicians became increasingly aware of the polls' importance and sought personal aid from the commercial pollsters when designing campaign strategies; the public loved to read and participate in the latest poll. In the 40's and 50's Gallup and Roper claimed that only about 20% of those sampled refused to participate in interviews, indicating that the public placed greater importance in answering the pollsters' questions than in responding to the census (Wheeler, 1976).

Riding high on the crest of their success in out-guessing the Literary Digest (and by modern standards it was little more than a guess: Gallup was off in his prediction of the Roosevelt majority by almost seven points) Gallup and Roper gained reputations as the foremost scientific pollsters. They were also building lucrative businesses as political consultants and even government policy-makers. Gallup adopted the stance that public opinion research was the surest salvation of democracy and majority rule (Wheeler, 1976; Gallup, 1980). Roper, on the other hand, was less optimistic about the effects of polling:

I think prediction of elections is a socially useless function . . . . We should protect from harm this infant science which performs so many socially useful functions, but which could be wrong in predicting elections. (Wheeler, 1976)

These statements made in 1944 proved prophetic: four years later the polls elected the wrong president.

While on the one hand the re-election of Truman over the "front runner," Thomas E. Dewey, was reassuring because it indicated that the American people were not unduly influenced by what they read in the
papers, the real concern was the fact that the press had so completely trusted the numbers and aligned itself with the pollsters, disregarding their own non-statistical judgments that the popular support was with Truman. As after the disaster of 1936, pollsters realized that faulty methodology was the culprit for the failure of 1948. As Wheeler (1976) had noted, quota sampling was found to be less scientifically reliable than originally thought:

Nineteen forty-eight made many pollsters understandably wary about relying on any method which depended so heavily on their personal judgment. As a consequence many of them turned to random sampling, a method which is the basis of most polling today.

Random sampling, as the name suggests, seeks to eliminate completely the confounding effects of systematic error and researcher bias or misjudgment by ensuring that every member in the population has an equal opportunity of being selected. However, using random sampling techniques does not ensure accurate results; indeed, results of such polls are expressed in terms of the probability that the findings are due to mere chance. Perhaps the greatest lesson of the early failures of public opinion research techniques has been that pollsters should not portray their science as a clean, exact discipline. Those who conduct and use poll data should realize that aside from sampling error (the only aspect of polling inaccuracy which has received adequate critical attention) there are a myriad of other sources of error which can bias a survey and which are less easily perceived and controlled.
Problems in Public Opinion Research

The fundamental problem of public opinion research lies in the fact that too few understand exactly what the polls measure. Bogart (1967) has observed "It has taken the opinion research profession a third of a century to gain acceptance for the principle of systematic sampling. It may take the next third to dispel the illusion that descriptive measurements of public opinion represent the 'real thing'." Increasingly, critics of public opinion polling are concerned not so much with the nuts and bolts of probability levels, margins of error and other methodological questions; those who understand polling realize that the true danger of polling information lies in the interpretation of results. The way a question is worded by a pollster, the way the results are analyzed and reported by the press, and the way the typical reader understands and interprets the poll story he finds in his newspaper allows subjectivity to undermine the original intent of the poll.

The problems in modern public opinion research can be viewed under three headings: methodological problems, interpretative problems, and generalizability and effects problems. Methodological issues, as seen above, have been given the most attention. These are the factors which are under the control of the researcher to a greater or lesser degree. Only time and experience (as well as stringent self-regulation of the profession) will correct the flaws in survey methods which have cost practitioners their credibility in the past.

Interpretive problems. The most common channel for publication of opinion research results today is the press. Indeed, as demonstrated
earlier, the press and the pollsters have shared the responsibility for the proliferation of interest in polls since the turn of the century. In many cases, it is the press which is responsible for the interpretation of poll results since journalists decide which polls will be news and which will not, and poll results are frequently cited by reporters as substantiation of a story angle they wish to develop. More recently, the media have begun conducting their own polls, gaining further control of what types of issues are surveyed and how the results will be presented to the masses.

Writing recently on the effects of journalism on polling, Roper (1980) outlined eight ways in which the media have adversely affected the field of public opinion research by claiming right to the interpretive function of poll reporting:

1. In the 30's, 40's and 50's journalists were suspicious of polling methods and suppressed results which they did not agree with;

2. When polls were reported in these early days, little critical judgment was exercised in reporting figures. Journalists simply did not understand what constituted good polling and gave man-in-the-street interviews the same coverage that they gave nationally sampled surveys;

3. When polling methods were more universally accepted, the media designated staff reporters as "survey experts." For the most part, these experts were young and inexperienced; the training they received in public opinion research consisted often of abbreviated seminars;

4. The press overemphasizes attention to sampling error and underemphasizes other sources of error which can bias a survey;
5. The press' ability to interpret poll results of others and to conduct its own polls shifts journalism's function from that of reporter of the news to maker of the news;

6. There is a tendency for media with polling capabilities to emphasize their own polls rather than the findings of independent researchers. This presents a conflict of interest problem;

7. The media have placed an unwarranted premium on speed in obtaining data, making thorough analysis of findings unlikely; and

8. By citing the latest poll results, the press tends to treat complex issues in an oversimplified manner, as if there were clearcut answers to all social questions.

Other writers like Germond (1980) have criticized journalism's role in the polling process by pointing out that "Once a newspaper has a polling capacity, it feels obliged to use it, often to duplicate the work of others or to do research that isn't worth doing." Thus, critics agree that the media are in part responsible for many of the problems in public opinion research as it is being conducted today, particularly when the press takes it upon itself to interpret data and make "substantiated" claims to special insight into the public mind.

Generalizability and effects problems. The most serious and least tangible problem which faces public opinion research today relates to the generalizability of poll findings and the effects that poll reports, which so proliferate in the media, have upon individuals. While researchers understand that the findings of any given survey are merely measures of opinion (not people) at a given place and time, the common
assumption of most readers of polls is that the majority opinion of the poll is the majority opinion of the population. Furthermore, opinion research has fostered a mistaken notion of how opinions are formed and how decisions are made. As Bogart (1967) has observed:

The prevailing model underlying our discipline is that of the single opinion. A person holds an opinion which he communicates to an interviewer. When he is influenced to change his mind, he replaces his former opinion with another one. This model has the virtue of great simplicity but it makes no sense, because conflicting and contradictory opinions may be held simultaneously and because they constantly jostle each other for dominance.

The problem of generalizability is really a methodological one, but it reveals itself after the research is complete and the results are analyzed. As such, it is the aspect of polling least under the control of the researcher. But it is also the factor which is most likely to mislead readers. When dealing with a subject as broad as people's opinions, a survey instrument must be sensitive enough to register subtle differences in strength of feeling, importance of issue to the individual, intellectual abilities and experience levels if the findings are to be accurately generalized to the public. However, standard interviews are designed to force respondents to take a stand on an issue without qualifying their answer to match their true cognitive state. Rarely is additional information about the respondent solicited except demographic traits for "classification purposes."

The forced choice interviewing method adopted by most pollsters has led to two generalizability problems: polls may either indicate that the public has made a clear decision on an issue when in fact no decision has been made, or polls may present results which appear to
contradict each other when in fact no inconsistency exists. The former problem is the result of a questionnaire which fails to measure the full range of the public's views on a subject (Cantril, 1980). This occurs most frequently when a respondent is encouraged to make a decision "one way or the other" and does not feel free to remain neutral or to reveal ignorance of the issue. The latter generalizability problem, the apparent inconsistency of responses, occurs frequently when respondents are unfamiliar with or ill-informed about an issue. Inconsistent or contradictory findings may also be an indication that the researcher failed to "unearth the forces embodied in public opinion on the issue" (Cantril, 1980).

Both of these generalizability problems lead to the same error: those who report these findings are implying that respondents who answer set questions in a survey situation respond to issues the same way the general public does. But there is mounting evidence from within the field of public opinion research and from critics of the profession that respondents in surveys are not comparable to the general public—and are, in fact, radically dissimilar on many dimensions. For example, it has been demonstrated that the typical scientific volunteer tends to be young, well educated, liberal in thought, approval seeking and affluent (Erickson, Cheatham & Jordan, 1978). Telephone survey methodologies tend to sample heavily from those who are likely to be at home: housewives, retired persons, the unemployed and the invalid (Wheeler, 1976). Door-to-door interviewers are reluctant to travel into dangerous neighborhoods, a factor which may have contributed to the pollsters' failure
to predict Truman's win in 1948 since interviewers did not sample from depressed areas of cities where the grassroots of the president's support lay (Wheeler, 1976). Germond (1980) has observed that people often refuse to respond to surveys when they do not have information about the issues in the poll. Those who do respond often bring more insight into their decisions than the general public actually possesses:

The lack of knowledge of the public about or interest in current affairs means that we are, on many issues, implying a much more informed decision by the public than has been made.

To answer the problem of ignorance on the issues, some researchers have adopted the practice of "educating" the respondent about the issue in question, providing an "objective" narrative of pro and con arguments, then asking the respondent to make a decision based upon the information he has just received. While this method no doubt cuts down the number of interviews which are lost due to lack of information about the issue, the results it produces are not necessarily representative of the opinions of the general public. Perhaps the greatest misconception still held by many public opinion researchers is that the "no opinion" or "don't know" option is a meaningless answer. In reality, these seemingly noncommittal responses may reveal more about the true nature of public opinion than a simple yes or no, especially on highly controversial, technical or abstract issues. Pollster Mervin Field (1980) acknowledged the danger of attempting to influence respondents' answers with "questions which educate":

Many of us recognize that once we are in the position of 'educating' the respondent to the pros and cons of an issue we are on dangerous ground. We try to be objective and to pose balanced arguments, but how can we be sure?
Posing arguments pro and con in the question preamble may be an honest attempt to bring a respondent up to speed... but it is grandiose to think that we can simulate all that happens in the normal course of information intake.

The latter part of the quotation by Field broaches the problem of public opinion research which has the most far-reaching implications. The fact is that pollsters, journalists and the public alike have come to think of the polls as real windows to the public consciousness, to think of samples as true microcosms of the population, to think of questionnaire responses as revelations of the natural opinion formation process. When the results of the polls do not correspond to our experience of reality, it is we who are deviant—numbers don't lie. Given this almost universal understanding (or misunderstanding) of the descriptive power of opinion research, social scientists must be alert to the potential that polls have in the formation of public opinion. Thus, the prescriptive function of poll data, the effects which poll reports have upon those who read and believe them, is far more influential in society than is the descriptive function. Indeed, it can be argued that if the purpose of public opinion research was merely descriptive and predictive as is overtly stated, commercial pollsters would have gotten out of the business long ago. Publishing public opinion data completes an economic function to the extent that the polls influence the masses to conform to the "majority opinion" and purchase a product, vote for a candidate, or support a social issue which has been the subject of a market research, political or public opinion survey.

The late Senator Albert Gore was somewhat ahead of his time in identifying the impact the polls have upon public opinion. He brought
his concerns to Congress in 1960 and was among the first politicians to call for regulation of pollsters:

The danger is that polls will be used to influence public opinion rather than reflect it. To the extent that the public considers the polls seriously meaningful, this danger is magnified . . . From my study, I have concluded that polls do, in fact, have an influence which is entirely unjustified.

Similar efforts have been launched in Congress to curtail the power of the polls, but there is a reluctance on the part of politicians to limit the scope of those commercial pollsters who helped put them in office. As Wheeler (1976) has noted, those who the polls treat unfairly do not get into office as a rule; Congress is full of "front runners."

More recently, the polling profession has exercised considerable self-control with organizations such as the National Council on Public Polls and the American Association for Public Opinion Research. Both organizations have established codes of poll disclosure and ethical standards, but there are no real sanctions against those who stray from the rules.

The Function of Public Opinion Research in Modern Society: Other Uses of Polls

While it is easy to point a finger of blame on the polling profession for exerting undue influence over public thought through its mother-channel, the press, perhaps the responsibility for opinion formation is not being accepted by its rightful owner: the public. Writing as early as 1948, Reisman and Glazer observed that "People today seem to us to be increasingly 'other directed,' rather than 'conscience
directed,' in their character structure. ..." The growth of mass media, particularly the electronic media which monopolize large portions of Americans' work and leisure hours, has only increased the public's reliance on information outside of itself for the formation of opinion. More so today than in the 40's when Reisman and Glazer wrote the public is

... very much concerned with the opinions of others rather than with what they themselves think, and they use their own opinions not so much to orient themselves in responsible action as to please, entertain, or simply get along with others.

Indeed, it has been said that public opinion polls serve primarily an entertainment function, a sort of legal keyhole peeping which satisfies our need to know if our neighbor lives and thinks as we do (Cantril, 1980). So called pop-polls have begun emerging which satisfy this need to compare ourselves with "the norm." While these pop-polls are less scientifically controlled than political polls, social issue surveys, or marketing research, the results of these non-scientific polls are likely to be perceived as accurate. This latter proposition forms the major hypothesis tested and confirmed by the study which is reported in the following sections of this paper.

Before concluding this overview of the problems in modern public opinion research, it is necessary to point out that polls do not always act as a negative influence on society. Polls often push issues to the forefront which would ordinarily be ignored in the day-to-day exchange of news and niceties. A great deal of the change in public attitude toward race relations, the war in Vietnam and social mores can be
directly traced to the efforts of pollsters to force the public to confront issues which were unpleasant to think about, but which were too important to ignore. If attitudes really do follow behavior as the self-persuasion theorists have asserted, we would like to think that there were many individuals who in 1956 made public declarations that racial discrimination is wrong when an interviewer from Harris came to the door—and who subsequently fought for desegregation in their community schools.

Of course this supposition is erroneous because it equates public opinion with the individual who holds the opinion. In the words of Bogart (1967), "... it is easy to succumb to the illusion that our measurements represent reality rather than a distorted, dim, approximate reflection of a reality that alters its shape when seen from different angles."

Perhaps the most optimistic view of the social influence of the polls comes from Davidson (1972) who believes that public opinion research encourages those who read the polls to take action on issues they feel are important:

... opinion research can help public opinion to form by letting individuals know that they are not alone; that appreciable numbers of others share their attitudes on given issues. These individuals are therefore more likely to let their voices be heard; they will be encouraged to search out and join others who share their attitudes.

In a time when technology and mobility seems to breed social isolation, the polls may well be the last vestige of the town meeting post where "Everyman" has a chance to be heard.
Literature Review Specific to the Study

Our age will be known for its information appetite. While in fairness, this could be said for every generation, the demand for facts, data and information is indeed insatiable in this latter half of the 20th century. To fill this endless news hole, journalists have relied increasingly upon opinion polls to provide a substantial portion of the public's information diet.

Although polling methods were originally designed as tools for probing and clarifying the complexities of public opinion and behavior, Cantril (1980) and others have noted that today polls are more often undertaken as ends in themselves—"a form of gossip half-accepted as gospel." The results of the misuses of public opinion polling by the media seem harmless enough when viewed superficially: pop-polls on trivial matters are quick, entertaining news bits, and the results are often forgotten moments after the poll is read or heard. But the proliferation of non-scientific polls may mislead or desensitize the audience so that the results of polls on more important matters may not be scrutinized as carefully or interpreted as accurately as they should by the audience.

In an effort to address the potential misuses of polling methods by journalists, the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) adopted a standard disclosure form for any report of survey results. The 1969 standard requires that every poll story include information about: (a) sample size, (b) the sponsor of the survey, (c) the complete wording of the questions asked, (d) sampling error,
(e) definition of the population sampled, (f) the method of obtaining interviews, (g) timing of the poll and (h) the basis for results that use less than the total sample.

Nevertheless, studies by Miller and Hurd (1982), Broh (1980) and Paletz, et al. (1980) have examined the poll reporting procedures of major newspaper and television journalists and found that the AAPOR standards are not consistently followed when the results of public opinion polls are disclosed in the media. Broh has cited journalists' propensity for focusing on the "horserace aspects" of polls, and claims that journalists often distort or disregard findings to suit their stories. Miller and Hurd found in their study of adherence to AAPOR standards that newspaper editors do not have a firm grasp of the basic principles of social scientific polling methods, thus do not see the importance of "wasting space" on the reporting of information such as sampling error, wording of the questions or methodology. The result of such laxness in the reporting of polls is that the public comes to accept all poll results as if they were equally accurate. As Paletz, et al. (1980) have observed, "... the way the methodological information about polling is reported in the media tends more to reassure than alert the audience about the possible defects of poll data."

But why is the public's proper interpretation of the accuracy of poll results so important? If polls are seen as mere attempts to measure and report public opinion at a given point in time with no grander purpose than that of providing timely information on topics of general interest, must journalists stringently maintain the standards of
disclosure? According to a spokesman for the Harris organization, the public recognizes that poll results are just estimates of public opinion; it is unnecessary to report information such as sampling error. However, a representative of Gallup has countered this claim, pointing out that sampling error and all of the other information required in the AAPOR standards is an integral part of the poll and as such, must be reported if a poll story is to be considered complete and accurate journalism. Thus, if the value of the poll is that it is the most convenient and understandable way to report on matters of popular interest and concern, the report is incomplete if it does not include all the information pertinent to the undertaking and analysis of the poll.

But many authors have asserted that the effects of public opinion polls are more far-reaching than the simple fulfillment of the public's demand for news. Fallows (1980) and others have suggested that polls can serve to undermine political leadership by shifting the attention of decision makers away from the objective facts of matters and by forcing leaders to focus attention on public sentiment. According to Dionne (1980) "Surveys do exert a powerful influence on the people who shape political opinion, particularly political contributors and political activists." Further, Paletz, et al. (1980) have noted that the effects of the current day's "predominance of polls with negative themes may be to reinforce, if not increase, disillusion and dismay with America's incumbent public officials and their asserted incapacity to cope with the nation's difficulties."
Gupte (1977) has charged that many public opinion polls do not realistically deal with the issues which are of importance to public policy leaders. Those few times that they do, the polls rarely measure opinions over the wide range of possible solutions (or tradeoffs) from which public officials must decide. Further, the forced-choice limits imposed by most pollsters severely reduce the range of possible responses. The matter is further complicated by the fact that few public officials and fewer members of the general public comprehend the deficiencies of opinion polls in providing an accurate measure of public sentiment. Both groups are often left with the impression that public policy issues have clear-cut answers and the public has decisive attitudes about which answers are the right ones.

In short, the critics have warned the poll is a powerful method for identifying and clarifying public concerns, but it is a complex process when it is done well. The irony is that polls become dangerous, misleading, when they appear most benign: when the complexities of the process are obscured by the simplicity and elegance of a few well-summarized, neatly charted results. The public is led to believe with such reporting that all polling is a simple process which can be undertaken by any sponsor with equal accuracy and rigor.

But not all public opinion data which is cited by journalists today is the result of responsible, scientific polling methods. Many publications and news broadcasts report the results of non-scientific, man-in-the-street, write-in or call-in polls, often without fully adhering to AAPOR standards for disclosure, and frequently without explaining to the
audience the difference between such non-scientific polls and a more rigorously conducted scientific poll.

One such example of media-sponsored non-scientific polls is the Orlando Sentinel's "Sound Off" feature. Appearing each Sunday on the front page of the Op-Ed section, "Sound Off" poses a question about a current issue in the news and invites readers to call in their opinion--pro or con--to the newspaper office using one of two 900-numbers. The calls are electronically tallied and the results are printed on the following Tuesday or Wednesday's editorial page.

Although the editors of the Sentinel do acknowledge that their poll is not scientifically conducted, and state as much in a brief disclaimer which accompanies the published results each week, they justify the results as being good measures of "the intensity of opinion on given issues," a sort of disclaimer to the disclaimer which is also published with each week's results.

A recent study by Fedler, et al. (1984) found that the results of the Sentinel's call-in poll differed significantly on several issues from a similar poll conducted in a scientific manner. Fedler observed an unsubstantiated trend that the Sentinel poll was a fairly good indicator of public opinion with matters of low controversy, but not with matters of high controversy. Two additional observations were made by Fedler, et al. which were not measured in their study's design. The Sentinel poll with its forced-choice format invited only respondents who had made up their minds on issues to phone in opinions. Thus, the claim that the poll is a good indicator of the "intensity of opinion" on
certain matters is questionable. Any scale which excludes the entire mid-range of opinion between extremities is not a good indicator of opinion intensity, merely of the willingness of a certain segment of the community which feels strongly convicted about an issue to call in an opinion. Further, Fedler conjectured that the disclaimer statement which accompanies the publication of the Sentinel's poll results is not fully understood by readers; the public does not have an understanding of the difference between a random sample of respondents and a sample of volunteers.

The purpose of the study reported herein was to obtain empirical evidence for these trends observed in former research but not yet tested. A scientifically sampled telephone survey was conducted which drew a sample from the greater Orlando area. The issues selected for this systematically sampled survey had appeared in the Orlando Sentinel's "Sound Off" feature, allowing comparison of the scientific survey and the non-scientific call-in poll.

**Predictions**

The first hypothesis was proposed in accordance to Fedler, et al.'s claim that Sentinel poll results most closely corresponded to the results of a scientifically conducted poll when the issue was lower in controversy, but the two sets of results often differed significantly when the issue was higher in controversy. The present study employed four issues, two of which were rated higher in the value "controversy"
by a group of independent coders and two of which were rated lower in controversy. These four issues were used to test the hypothesis:

\[ H_1: \text{the Sentinel call-in poll results will differ significantly from the results of a scientifically conducted survey on issues of higher controversy, but not on issues of lower controversy.} \]

In an effort to test the claim of the Sentinel's editors that the call-in poll has descriptive value because it measures the "intensity" of opinion on certain issues, a second hypothesis was proposed:

\[ H_2: \text{a scientific poll which employs a five-point opinion measure is a more sensitive and illustrative measure of range of opinion than is a poll which measures opinion with a forced dichotomous choice response, such that opinion on the issues will distribute somewhat normally over the possible range of opinion when a five-point scale is used.} \]

Notice the change in the wording of \( H_2 \); the Sentinel's term opinion "intensity" is replaced with the more appropriate term opinion "range."

A detailed discussion of the reason for this differentiation is contained in the results section which follows.

While at first consideration \( H_2 \) appears self-evident, the fact that many commercial pollsters utilize a limited forced-choice format in questionnaire indicates that many researchers believe that a simple yes or no (with a possible "don't know" option) is a sensitive measure of public opinion on even the most complex issues. If the majority of responses to given issues are highly polarized or greatly skewed toward one end of the spectrum of a wide range of opinion choices, then it might
be said that a forced-choice measure is as sensitive a measure of strength or range of opinion as a multiple choice measure. However, for most issues, it is unlikely that a random sample of opinion will yield such polarized or skewed results: public opinion is generally normally distributed over the entire range of possible opinion choices. Therefore a five-point scale should reveal that a majority of responses fall within the mid-range of opinion.

In addition to the four issues of high and low controversy, one issue which had been used in the Sentinel call-in poll was selected for the purpose of testing the third and fourth hypotheses. This was an issue which was ranked as only moderately controversial by the independent group of coders.

The third hypothesis predicted that the general public does not have an understanding of the difference between scientifically conducted polls and quasi-polls like the "Sound Off" feature:

\[ H_3: \text{the disclaimer statement used by the Orlando Sentinel in reporting its results is generally misunderstood or disregarded by readers; the majority of respondents will regard the information contained in the call-in poll report as representative of the true opinion of the community.} \]

An interaction effect was also predicted whereby those respondents who tend to agree with the majority opinion expressed by the call-in poll's respondents would be more likely to accept the non-scientific poll as representative of the opinion of the community than would those who disagree with the majority opinion expressed in the poll. This
prediction was based upon the principles of selectivity in message perception whereby individuals seek information which agrees with their beliefs (Emmert and Donaghy, 1981, and others). Thus, those who agreed with the majority opinion expressed by the report of the call-in poll should selectively retain the information that a large number of their neighbors agreed with their opinion, yet selectively filter the disclaimer statement which warns that the poll was not scientifically sampled. It was hypothesized that:

\[ H_4: \text{ persons who hold opinions similar to the majority opinion reported in the Sentinel poll will be most likely to disregard the disclaimer statement: the more closely a respondent's own opinion corresponds with the majority opinion in the non-scientific poll, the more likely that the respondent will be to regard the call-in poll's results as representative of the community's true opinion.} \]

In addition to the hypotheses listed above, the telephone study sought empirical information for six more research questions:

\[ Q_1: \text{ what are the effects of poll reports on subsequent formation of opinion?} \]

\[ Q_2: \text{ does the general public believe that their opinions on issues are shaped or influenced by the information contained in poll stories?} \]

\[ Q_3: \text{ to what degree does educational background or occupation mediate the influence which polls have upon those who read or hear stories quoting poll results?} \]
Q_4: do individuals with higher education levels or more highly skilled occupations understand the meaning of the Sentinel's disclaimer statement better than those with lower education levels and less highly skilled occupations?

Q_5: what reasons are given by respondents for either trusting or mistrusting the Sentinel poll's results?

Q_6: do those who read "Sound Off" believe it represents the true opinion of the community more than those who do not read the feature? Do those who phone in their opinions to the Sentinel poll believe in the representativeness of "Sound Off" more than those who do not phone in their opinions?
PROCEDURE

The sample for this survey was selected using a random digit dialing method currently employed by many marketing research organizations. Interviewers began at a randomly selected point in the Winter Park telephone directory (which contains listings for Orlando and its neighboring communities) and added the number 10 to the last two digits of the phone number. The interviewer continued down the list of numbers, always adding 10 to the last two digits of each phone number listed until an interview was completed. Upon completion of an interview, the interviewer would count five columns forward in the phone book and resume random digit dialing in the same manner. This method, while it samples a great deal of disconnected and business numbers, allows the researcher to survey those with unlisted numbers and new listings, and has the added benefit of being free from ordered effects.

Three interviewers placed 953 telephone calls during a one-month period and completed 215 interviews. Interviewers were unable to reach anyone at 330 of the households sampled, 47 of the numbers sampled were business phones, 90 persons refused to be interviewed, 18 households had no one over the age of 18 at home when an interviewer called and 8 individuals were unable to hear or understand the interviewers.

Prior to designing the survey instrument, the author selected 11 varied, unique issues which had appeared as "Sound Off" questions in the Orlando Sentinel since September of 1983. All of the issues selected
were still timely and newsworthy. These 11 issues were presented to an independent group of 58 coders who evaluated the level of controversy of each issue using a 7-point Likert-type scale with 1 labeled "Extremely Controversial" and 7, "Not at All Controversial" (see Appendix 1). The two issues which obtained the lowest mean scores were defined for the purpose of this study as "higher in controversy" while the two issues which obtained the highest mean scores were defined as "lower in controversy." Since the lowest mean score given to any issue was 1.9 and the highest was 5.4, it was clear that true high and low controversy distinctions had not been established. It was necessary to define controversy in terms of higher and lower degrees. The two questions which were seen as most controversial were "Should handguns be banned in this country?" ($\bar{X} = 1.9$) and "Should Florida's legal drinking age be raised to 21?" ($\bar{X} = 2.4$); the two questions which were seen as least controversial were "Should driving be allowed on Florida's beaches? ($\bar{X} = 4.0$) and "Should college football have a playoff system to choose a national champion?" ($\bar{X} = 5.4$).

In addition to selecting those issues which would be used to test $H_1$ and $H_2$, the controversy ratings were used to select one issue which was moderately controversial for use in testing $H_3$ and $H_4$. The question "Should Florida adopt lethal injection as its method of execution?" received a mean controversy rating of 3.3, placing it in the mid-range of issue controversy among the 11 issues rated.

The interview for this study consisted of five parts and took approximately five minutes to complete over the phone (see Appendix 2).
The first section asked the respondent to indicate his/her opinion on the five questions (i.e., Handguns, Driving on the Beach, Lethal Injection, Drinking Age, and College Football) using a 5-point scale with the number 1 representing a strong yes, 2 a moderate yes, 3 no opinion, 4 a moderate no and 5 a strong no. This provided a direct check of H_2 and also yielded results necessary for testing H_4.

Respondents were asked in section two of the interview to try to make a decision "one way or the other" and to give a yes or no answer to four of the five questions (Handguns, Driving on the Beach, Drinking Age and College Football). If the respondent could not make a decision, he/she was allowed to respond with a "no opinion" or "don't know." Results from this section were used as direct comparisons with the "Sound Off" poll to test H_1.

The third section of the interview required only that the respondent listen to a report of results of a "Sound Off" poll (the question was the Lethal Injection issue) which ended with the disclaimer statement the Sentinel uses to interpret its results: "The weekly phone-in question is not a scientific sampling, but it can reflect the intensity of readers' feelings." If respondents so requested, the poll report was repeated to insure full comprehension of the figures and the disclaimer.

The fourth section of the interview asked questions pertaining to the poll report read in section three. Respondents were first asked how well they believed the Sentinel poll revealed Central Florida's opinion on this issue and were asked to respond with the phrases "very well," "pretty well," "not very well," or "not at all well." If a respondent
could not answer or was unwilling to do so, he/she was permitted to give the response "don't know" or "no opinion." This question directly tested \( H_3 \) and provided partial information needed to test \( H_4 \) and several of the research questions.

Next, the respondent was asked to elaborate on his last answer. The open-ended question, "Why do you feel that way?" was asked to attempt to reveal respondents' judgments of the Sentinel call-in poll's ability to represent the opinion of the general public. This question produced information necessary for answering \( Q_5 \).

The next question the respondent was asked required he/she make a decision "one way or the other" about the Lethal Injection issue. This sought to provide information for \( Q_1 \) and \( Q_3 \), that is, to see if hearing the results of a published poll would influence respondents to change their initial positions in the direction of the reported majority opinion. Again, if a respondent was unable to give a yes or no answer, they were encouraged to respond "don't know" or "no opinion."

Finally, in section four, the respondents were asked how much they believed their decisions were influenced by knowing how others in their community felt about the issue. This provided an answer for \( Q_2 \).

Section five of the interview asked several questions which were used to help answer several of the research questions. Respondents were asked about their newspaper-reading habits and whether they had ever read "Sound Off" or called in their opinion to the "Sound Off" poll. The highest level of education completed and the respondent's occupation
were recorded to complete the survey. Respondents were debriefed as to the true purpose of the study and thanked for their cooperation.
RESULTS

Because interviewing took place during day and evening hours of weekdays and weekends, the sample of this study did not appear to draw a disproportionate number of individuals who are likely to spend a great deal of time at home. Of the 215 respondents, 108 were female and 107 were male. Only 16% of respondents were housewives, 13% were retired and a mere 4% were full-time students. The remaining 67% of respondents reported that they were employed outside of the home or self-employed.

It was predicted in $H_1$ that the Sentinel call-in poll results would differ significantly from the results on a scientifically conducted survey on issues of higher controversy, but not on issues of lower controversy. Tables 1 through 4 demonstrate that results only partially support this hypothesis. As shown in Tables 1 and 2, the differences between the Sentinel poll and the scientific survey were significant at the $p < .001$ level for both issues of higher controversy. On the question of Handguns, significantly more respondents in this scientific survey favored banning handguns than did respondents in the call-in poll ($X^2 = 146, df = 1, p < .001$). While the results of the call-in poll and the scientific survey on the Drinking Age question seemed to follow similar lines, a chi-square analysis revealed that significantly more respondents in the scientific survey opposed raising the legal drinking age to 21 than in the Sentinel poll ($X^2 = 14.2, df = 1, p < .001$).
### Table 1. COMPARISON OF RESPONSES TO A SCIENTIFICALLY AND NON-SCIENTIFICALLY SAMPLED POLL ON THE QUESTION SHOULD HANDGUNS BE BANNED IN THIS COUNTRY?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Scientific Poll</td>
<td>1108</td>
<td>7641</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1195</td>
<td>7764</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[X^2 = 146, \text{ df } = 1, p < .001\]

### Table 2. COMPARISON OF RESPONSES TO A SCIENTIFICALLY AND NON-SCIENTIFICALLY SAMPLED POLL ON THE QUESTION SHOULD FLORIDA'S LEGAL DRINKING AGE BE RAISED TO 21?

<table>
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<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Scientific Poll</td>
<td>4925</td>
<td>1091</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5077</td>
<td>1151</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[X^2 = 14.2, \text{ df } = 1, p < .001\]
On issues of lower controversy, there was no clear indication that the Sentinel call-in poll's results were similar to the results of the scientifically sampled survey. Hypothesis 1 received only partial confirmation because a test of one of the issues of lower controversy yielded significant differences between the two surveys. As is demonstrated in Table 3, response patterns to the question "Should driving be allowed on Florida's beaches?" were reversed in the scientific study from the findings of the Sentinel. Chi-square analysis revealed a massively significant value of $X^2 = 291.5$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$ since 54% of respondents in the scientific poll opposed driving on the beaches compared to only 13% of those who called in their opinion to the

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scientific Poll</td>
<td>95</td>
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<td>206</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1108</td>
<td>8749</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$X^2 = 291.5$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$
Sentinel; 46% of the scientifically selected respondents favored driving on the beach as opposed to a staggering 87% of the Sentinel's volunteer respondents.

Results from the other lower controversy issue used to test the latter part of $H_1$ provided support for the prediction. As shown in Table 4, there was no significant difference between the results on the scientific survey and the call-in poll on the question of College Football, in fact, the chi-square value was actually 0 (df = 1).

Before leaving the discussion of $H_1$ it must be noted that chi-squares were executed on the data excluding from analysis those who had responded "don't know" to the questions in the scientific poll since the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scientific Poll</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Scientific</td>
<td>557</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poll</td>
<td></td>
<td>690</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>686</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$N = 848$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$X^2 = 0, \ df = 1, \ NSD$
Sentinel does not have this third category. On the last question discussed, the College Football issue, it is interesting to note that 26% of respondents in the scientific poll had no opinion. While this is not a majority, it does point to the possibility that many members of the general public were uninformed about the issue; thus, when the Sentinel reported that 81% of its poll respondents favored a college playoff system, it may have been implying a more certain and unanimous public opinion than actually existed.

The "Sound Off" feature editors assert that their poll, while not scientifically sampled, provides a good indication of "intensity of opinion" held by readers. The primary error of this statement is the misuse of the term intensity from a social scientific standpoint. First, intensity is rarely applied to so tenuous a concept as opinion. Opinion stands at the surface of the cognitive process, that is, it is most susceptible to change with the various external forces which challenge and persuade the individual. A more fundamental cognitive state is termed attitude, with belief reigning at the core of the individual's cognitive reality. Intensity is most often used in conjunction with the terms attitude and belief. Intensity scales are multidimensional measures of attitude and belief which take into consideration the valence or favorability of attitude options, the complexity of attitudes, the centrality of attitudes in a person's belief structure and the salience of issues at a given point in time (Bogardus, 1925; Thurstone, 1928; Likert, 1932; Guttman, 1944; Triandis, 1971; and Scott,
To presume that a simple yes or no answer embodies all of these complex attitude factors is pure naivete.

Perhaps the word the Sentinel editors really meant to use was "strength." Opinions can be strongly held at times when an issue is highly salient to the individual. When information is lacking, or when the issue simply does not fall within the individual's realm of attention, or when conflicting forces make it difficult for the individual to choose between opinion options, opinions are less strongly held. But a simple yes or no cannot reveal adequately strength of opinion since the mid-range of uncertainty is completely ignored.

The second hypothesis predicted that opinion on the issues in the scientifically sampled poll would distribute somewhat normally over the possible range of opinion when a 5-point Likert-type scale was used to measure strength of opinion. As Figures 1 through 5 show, opinion was not normally distributed for all issues, but an interesting and unexpected trend was observed. Those issues gaining results which were highly skewed or greatly polarized were the two issues which had the higher controversial value. The two lower controversy issues and the issue which scored in the mid-range of controversy were more likely to be normally distributed. Opinion on the higher controversial issue of Hanguns was polarized, with 28% in favor of banning handguns and 34% opposed. Only small percentages of respondents chose each of the "weaker" opinion options.
Figure 1. Distribution of Opinion on the Question
Should Handguns be Banned in this Country?
Figure 2. Distribution of Opinion on the Question
Should Florida's Legal Drinking Age be Raised to 21?
Figure 3. Distribution of Opinion on the Question
Should Florida Adopt Lethal Injection as its Method of Execution?
Figure 4. Distribution of Opinion on the Question Should Driving be Allowed on Florida's Beaches?
Figure 5. Distribution of Opinion on the Question
Should College Football Have a Playoff System To Choose a National Champion?
The other higher controversy issue, the Drinking Age question, produced a highly skewed distribution of opinion. A full 60% of respondents believed that the drinking age should be raised to 21.

However, opinion on the questions which were lower in controversy tended to distribute more normally over the range of choices. When asked if driving should be allowed on Florida's beaches, 26% said a strong yes, 11% a moderate yes, 24% were unsure, 8% said a moderate no, and 31% were strongly opposed to the idea. The other lower controversy issue, College Football showed 40% of respondents were unsure with 32% expressing a strong yes and only 9% a strong no to the question. The Lethal Injection issue which scored in the neutral range for controversy also yielded a somewhat normally distributed opinion distribution: 21% believed strongly that lethal injection should be adopted, 12% gave a moderate yes, 35% were unsure, 6% gave a moderate no and 26% were strongly opposed to the idea. While \( H_2 \) failed to receive full confirmation, an explanation may be that issue controversy accounted for differences in opinion between the issues tested.

As predicted, the majority of respondents believed that the information contained in the Sentinel poll report was representative of the true opinion of the community, apparently ignoring the disclaimer that the poll was not scientifically conducted. Of those sampled in the scientific study, 19% believed the call-in poll revealed Central Florida's opinion on the issue of Lethal Injection very well; 51% believed the call-in poll did pretty well; 32% believed the call-in poll revealed true opinion not very well and only 8% believed the call-in
poll did not reveal the public's opinion at all (7% were unsure). When the categories were collapsed into those who apparently trusted the results and those who did not, 70% believed the Sentinel to be on target in its portrayal of public opinion on the issue but only 23% doubted the figures. This provided full support for the third hypothesis and indicated that the disclaimer statement used by the Sentinel in reporting its results is generally misunderstood or disregarded by readers. Further illustration of this point will follow in the report of results in connection with Q5.

The fourth hypothesis had predicted an interaction effect whereby respondents who initially held opinions similar to the majority opinion reported in the Sentinel poll would be most likely to disregard the disclaimer statement. However, there proved to be virtually no correlation between respondents' initial opinion about the lethal injection issue and their evaluation of the call-in poll's results (r = .06). Respondents in the scientific study whose opinions corresponded with the majority opinion in the Sentinel call-in poll were not more likely than others to regard the call-in poll's results as well representative of the community. Indeed, the strong main effect which confirmed H3 indicates that trust of the call-in poll's results was distributed rather evenly over all respondents in this study.

In addition to testing the four hypotheses, the present study posed six research questions. The first, Q1 asked what effects hearing a poll report of the Sentinel's findings on the Lethal Injection call-in
question had on respondents' subsequent opinion formation. An answer for this question was sought from two perspectives.

First, the analysis determined whether those respondents who indicated the Sentinel poll results were very or pretty representative of true public opinion were more likely to make subsequent opinion statements in line with the majority opinion expressed in the Sentinel poll. As Table 5 shows, it was found that those who tended to believe the Sentinel poll did tend to express final opinions on the issue which corresponded to the majority opinion in the Sentinel poll significantly more often than those who mistrusted the Sentinel poll ($X^2 = 37.37$, $df = 8$, $p < .001$).

Table 5. PERCEPTIONS OF THE REPRESENTATIVENESS OF THE SENTINEL POLL BY RESPONDENTS' FINAL OPINION CHOICES ON THE QUESTION SHOULD FLORIDA ADOPT LETHAL INJECTION AS ITS METHOD OF EXECUTION?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very</th>
<th>Pretty</th>
<th>Not Very</th>
<th>Not at All</th>
<th>DK</th>
<th>- Representative</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>60</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

41 110 32 17 15 N = 215

$x^2 = 37.37$, $df = 8$, $p < .001$
Second, the data were analyzed to determine whether exposing the respondents to the results which were published in the "Sound-Off" feature caused readers to change their opinions on the Lethal Injection issue in the direction of the majority opinion expressed in the Sentinel poll. Applying the McNemar test of changes, it was found that among those respondents in this study who changed their opinion on the Lethal Injection issue after hearing the results of the Sentinel's poll, a significant number changed in the direction of the majority opinion expressed in the call-in poll report (McNemar $X^2 = 6.72$, df $= 1$, $p < .001$; see Table 6).

Table 6. AGREEMENT WITH THE MAJORITY OPINION EXPRESSED IN THE SENTINEL POLL BEFORE HEARING RESULTS COMPARED WITH AGREEMENT WITH MAJORITY OPINION AFTER HEARING RESULTS AMONG RESPONDENTS WHO CHANGED THEIR OPINION ON THE ISSUE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opinion Before</th>
<th>Opinion After</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td>50</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

McNemar $X^2 = 6.72$, df $= 1$, $p < .01$
Thus it appears that poll reports may influence those who read or hear the results to change their opinions in the direction of the published "majority opinion," if they are to change their minds at all. Further, there is some evidence that trust in the poll report and opinion formation may be related.

Research question 2 asked whether the general public believes that their opinions are influenced by the information contained in the polls they read or hear. Respondents in this study were asked how much they believed their opinions about the Lethal Injection issue were influenced by knowing how other members in their community had responded to the same issue. A substantial 58% replied that they were "not at all" influenced, 18% indicated they were influenced "not very much," another 17% believed they were influenced only "somewhat," 4% "did not know" how much they had been influenced and only 3% said they were influenced "a great deal." It is interesting to observe that of the 20% who believed they were influenced a great deal or somewhat by hearing the call-in poll results, 81% believed the Orlando Sentinel poll gave an accurate profile of Central Florida's opinion on the issue.

Further attempting to measure actual influence which the Sentinel poll report may have had upon the opinion choices of respondents in this study, Q3 asked to what degree educational background and occupational background mediate the influence which polls have upon those who read or hear stories quoting poll results. The answer, according to the findings of this study, is that educational background and occupational level do not appear to mediate the poll reports' ability to influence
public opinion. As demonstrated in Tables 7 and 8, there were no significant differences in the amount of opinion change of respondents over three levels of education or two levels of occupational skill. The only observable trend was found in the comparison of educational level and opinion change relative to the majority opinion expressed in the Sentinel call-in poll report. It was found that those respondents who had no more than a high school education were somewhat more likely than other respondents to change their initial opinions about Lethal

Table 7. RESPONDENTS' OPINION CHANGE RELATIVE TO THE MAJORITY OPINION EXPRESSED IN THE SENTINEL POLL BY RESPONDENT EDUCATION LEVEL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>+ Change</th>
<th>No Change</th>
<th>- Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate or Professional School</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Total      | 43       | 130       | 40       | N = 213* |

\[ x^2 = 8.15, \text{ df } = 4, \text{ NSD} \]

*2 respondents refused to reveal educational level
Table 8. RESPONDENTS' OPINION CHANGE RELATIVE TO THE MAJORITY OPINION EXPRESSED IN THE SENTINEL POLL BY RESPONDENT OCCUPATIONAL LEVEL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>+ Change</th>
<th>No Change</th>
<th>- Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional Occupation</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Professional Occupation</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ x^2 = .4, \text{ df} = 2, \text{ NSD} \]

Injection in the direction of the majority opinion expressed in the poll report they heard. Nevertheless, this finding failed to reach the required level of significance, making its use in forming inferences about the population impossible.

The fourth research question sought to determine how the factors of educational level or occupational level mediated respondents' understanding of the Sentinel's disclaimer. As Table 9 shows, there was a significant difference between respondents with varying levels of education and their perceptions of the call-in poll's adequacy as a barometer of public opinion. Dividing the sample into those with a high school diploma or less, those with some college or a four-year degree and those with some graduate or professional training or a graduate
Table 9. PERCEPTIONS OF THE REPRESENTATIVENESS OF THE SENTINEL POLL BY RESPONDENT EDUCATIONAL LEVEL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very</th>
<th>Pretty</th>
<th>Not Very</th>
<th>Not at All</th>
<th>DK</th>
<th>- Representative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate School</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<p>| | | | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>41</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>N = 213*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[X^2 = 21.2, \text{ df} = 8, \ p < .01\]

*2 respondents refused to reveal educational level

degree, significant chi-square values of \(X^2 = 21.2, \text{ df} = 8, \ p < .01\) were obtained as the most highly educated respondents were least likely to believe that the Sentinel poll revealed Central Florida's true opinion "very well" or "pretty well." Fifty percent of respondents with graduate training believed the Sentinel poll revealed true public opinion "not very well" or "not at all well" while only 35% believed it did so "very well" or "pretty well" (the remaining 15% were unsure). But for respondents with only college educations, 26% believed the Sentinel poll was "not very" or "not at all" indicative of public opinion, with 68% believing "Sound-Off" revealed Central Florida's true opinion on the
Lethal Injection issue "very well" or "pretty well" (7% were undecided). Those with only grade or high school educations were the most trusting of the call-in poll, with 79% believing the "Sound-Off" results revealed public opinion on the issue "very" or "pretty well." Only 16% believed the poll was not very or not at all indicative of true public opinion on the Lethal injection issue, and 5% were undecided.

There was no significant difference between those who held professional occupations and those who were non-professional with regard to their perceptions of the representativeness of the Sentinel poll's results. Table 10 shows that over the two levels of occupational skill, professionals were equally as likely to believe that the call-in poll was representative as were non-professionals ($X^2 = 1.55$, df = 4, NSD). Sixty-one percent of professionals believed that the "Sound-Off" feature

| Table 10. PERCEPTIONS OF THE REPRESENTATIVENESS OF THE SENTINEL POLL BY RESPONDENT OCCUPATIONAL LEVEL |
|-----------------------------------------------|--------------|--------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
|                                              | Very         | Pretty            | Not Very        | Not at All     | DK             | - Representative |
| Professional                                 | 7            | 17                | 7              | 4              | 4              | 39             |
| Non-Professional                             | 34           | 93                | 25             | 13             | 11             | 176            |
|                                              | 41           | 110               | 32             | 17             | 15             | N = 215        |

$X^2 = 1.55$, df = 4, NSD
represented the true public opinion "very well" or "pretty well" as compared to 72% of non-professionals. Only 28% of those respondents with professional occupations indicated that they mistrusted the Sentinel's results which was comparable to the 25% of respondents with non-professional occupations who mistrusted the Sentinel's results. Only 10% of professionals were unsure about the representativeness of the call-in poll, as were a mere 6% of non-professionals.

A total of 151 respondents in this study believed that the Sentinel poll revealed Central Florida's true opinion on the Lethal Injection issue "very well" or "pretty well." The fifth research question asked what reasons were given by respondents for either trusting or dis­

Of those respondents who believed the call-in poll to be representative of true public opinion, 32% replied that the poll's results corresponded to their beliefs or with what they perceived to be the community's belief about the issue and therefore trusted the figures; 23% did not know why they believed the poll results; 17% said they trusted the figures because the Sentinel is a good paper and would not print inaccurate information; 11% believed the sample used in the call-in poll was "large enough" to be trusted; 5% believed that those who phoned in their opinions to the Sentinel were well informed on the issue and were responsible citizens, thus they were able to speak for
the community; 4% realized that the Sentinel poll was not a scientific sample, but felt that the sample was "good enough" to trust; 3% said that because the "Sound-Off" feature is a poll it must be accurate; 2% seemed to believe that the Sentinel poll was not really representative of true public opinion even though they initially said it represented Central Florida's opinion "very well" or "pretty well;" 1% observed that even if people try to bias the poll by phoning in an opinion more than once, these "fanatics" would balance themselves out on both sides of the issue; and another 1% indicated that they had a "gut feeling" that the poll was on target and had no reason to disagree with the findings (percentages are rounded and do not equal a full 100%).

Of those 49 respondents who believed that the Sentinel call-in poll represented Central Florida's opinion on the lethal injection issue "not very well" or "not at all well," 26% observed that only a certain kind of person would phone in an opinion, causing bias; 20% believed the sample size of the Sentinel poll was too small; 10% identified the fact that the poll was not scientifically sampled as the reason for mistrust of the figures; another 10% did not believe that those who responded to the phone-in poll really understood the Lethal Injection issue well enough to give a representative response; still another 10% said that the information in the poll conflicted with their own opinions or what they thought their community believed; 10% gave no reason for their mistrust of the figures; 4% observed that the sample was not randomly chosen; 4% simply did not have confidence in the poll; 2% did not think that call-in polls in general were a good way of getting the full range
of public opinion; and another 2% felt that the Sentinel was a biased paper so they did not believe the results reported in its call-in poll.

In an effort to determine whether those who read the Sentinel's "Sound-Off" feature or who phone in their opinions to the Sentinel's poll are more likely to disregard the disclaimer and perceive the results of the call-in poll as representative of true public opinion the last research question was posed. However, the results as shown in Table 11 revealed no significant difference between "Sound-Off" readers in their likelihood to trust the Sentinel poll's results ($X^2 = .9$, df = 1, NSD). Nor did "Sound-Off" poll callers and non-callers differ in their likelihood to trust the Sentinel's figures ($X^2 = 2.9$, df = 1, NSD; see Table 12). In fact, a slight trend was observed whereby those

Table 11. PERCEPTIONS OF THE REPRESENTATIVENESS OF THE SENTINEL POLL BY RESPONDENTS' READING OF THE "SOUND-OFF" FEATURE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Representative</th>
<th>Not Representative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Sound-Off&quot; Reader</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-&quot;Sound-Off&quot; Reader</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>151</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$X^2 = .9$, df = 1, NSD

*15 were unsure
Table 12. PERCEPTIONS OF THE REPRESENTATIVENESS OF THE SENTINEL POLL BY RESPONDENTS' EXPERIENCE WITH CALLING "SOUND-OFF"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Representative</th>
<th>Not Representative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Sound-Off&quot; Caller</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-&quot;Sound-Off&quot; Caller</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>151</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>N = 200*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ \chi^2 = 2.9, \text{ df} = 1, \text{ NSD} \]

*15 were unsure

who stated that the Sentinel call-in poll results were "not very" or "not at all" representative of Central Florida's true opinion on the Lethal Injection issue were somewhat more likely to phone in their opinion to the call-in poll. However this finding failed to meet the required level of significance.
DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to provide empirical evidence for heretofore non-validated observations which had been made concerning (a) the accuracy of newspaper call-in polls and (b) the public's understanding of the polls which they read in their daily papers. It is with great caution, however, that the present author presents the finding of this study. This survey was conducted not for the purpose of challenging the results which have been published by the Orlando Sentinel in past issues, nor for the purpose of criticizing the newspaper's effort to get a feel for the community's opinions on topical issues. The mistake of many survey researchers, including the best commercial pollsters, is their penchant for presenting their own survey findings as if they were undisputable truths, simultaneously attempting to undermine the credibility of other researchers' work.

If the present study is valuable, it is because it sheds some light on the processes which are involved in the recording and reporting of public opinion, areas often missed by polls like the Sentinel's because of the basic design and apparent inattention to scientific rigor. The issues were really unimportant as were the opinion expressions which differentiated this study's results from the results of the Sentinel poll. The importance of this study lay simply in the fact that differences were found between the scientific and the non-scientific studies,
and could be explained by citing the methodological differences in the two designs.

This study is also important because it made a start at uncovering the process of opinion formation which takes place when an unsuspecting, trusting reader encounters a poll report. As the findings from this study indicate, often the reader absorbs only the numbers, dismissing or misinterpreting the disclaimer to the polls accuracy, then proceeds to align his/her opinion on the issue with the "majority opinion."

This study also called attention to the fact that not all questions which appear in public opinion polls carry the same controversial or emotional loads, an intervening factor which certainly influences the way in which respondents answer questionnaires. The present study also attempted to demonstrate that while soliciting a "yes or no" answer to questions of the day may be a convenient way of getting a handle on how the public "feels," it is often an inadequate measure of true public opinion. For those who would argue that the public is sophisticated (or suspicious) enough to recognize that the answers of a group of volunteer respondents may be radically different from the answers of a randomly selected group, this study presented some evidence that people trust poll results, believing that the numbers represent the true opinions of the population—even when a disclaimer of the results accompanies the report.

The foremost problem with the study reported herein was the relatively small sample size, N=215 completed interviews. Conservatively speaking, the confidence interval for a sample of this size is (.07)
(Wimmer & Dominick, 1983). Nevertheless, the fact that the sample was drawn completely at random from those in the Orlando area with in-service telephones (listed and unlisted) enhances the generalizability of the findings.

Another limitation of the present study relates to the survey medium, the telephone questionnaire. While the survey took approximately five minutes to complete under optimal conditions, the format required that respondents listen carefully to questions and quoted material, remember some information for use in later parts of the interview, and make answer choices from lists of rather finely drawn options. At times it was clear to the interviewers that the respondent did not understand questions or was unsure or suspicious about the true purpose of the survey. Problem interviews were politely terminated, but it is possible that confounding effects of fatigue, demand characteristics or interviewer bias (in the form of personality preferences) may have acted upon some respondents.

Perhaps the greatest concern in analyzing the results of this study lay in the issues which were used to test the first hypothesis. Even though a direct comparison with the Sentinel's results was not the purpose of this study (that is the researcher would not "prove" or "disprove" the Sentinel's results) the Sentinel's findings were used as benchmarks against which the scientific study were set. Yet temporal differences between the Sentinel's first publication of "Sound-Off" questions and this study may have accounted for the significant differences found between the results of the two polls. For example, the
question about the Drinking Age was first posed by the Sentinel in the fall of 1983, but at the time of sampling for the present study (summer of 1984) the Drinking Age issue held a prime position in the local news. Other issues used in this study were obviously more salient in the community when the Sentinel first ran the questions than at the time of the present study (i.e. the College Football question).

Further, those issues which were selected by the independent group of coders as being higher and lower in controversy may have reflected varying levels of concern in the college population, but not the general population of Orlando-area residents. The survey design failed to validate the student-coders' selection of higher and lower controversy issues by soliciting respondents' evaluations of issue controversy, a check which would have taken a short amount of interview time to accomplish.

Yet the fact that three of the major hypotheses of this study received partial or full confirmation, combined with the strength of some of the observed effects, provides evidence that the suppositions of past researchers were correct: non-scientific, pop-polls are not adequate barometers of public opinion, but the public believes that they are; furthermore, the public may actually form its opinions on issues based upon the results of the latest poll.

The finding that for issues of higher controversy results of the Sentinel poll and results of the more scientifically controlled telephone survey differed significantly was not surprising—it was the first part of the H1 prediction. However, the results also indicated that the
Sentinel poll differed significantly from the scientific poll on one of the issues of lower controversy, contradicting the second part of hypothesis one. But a closer look at the issue may provide an explanation for the unpredicted findings.

The college students who rated the controversy levels of various issues gave the Driving on the Beaches question a relatively high score (indicating lower controversy). However on an absolute scale of 1 = high and 7 = low controversy, the Beach issue scored just a point off the mid-value of $\bar{X} = 4.0$. Thus, this question was not truly a low controversy issue, a fact which may account for the apparent unsettled current of opinion within the community. Opinions on the issue which was rated lowest in controversy, the College Football question, did not differ significantly from the Sentinel poll to the present survey, lending additional support to $H_1$. It is probable that the higher score ($\bar{X} = 5.4$) indicates a less equivocal issue in the community's agenda of public concerns.

The test of $H_2$ revealed unexpected, but logical trends. It was observed that opinion on issues of higher controversy was either skewed or polarized, indicating the emotional value with which people tend to invest issues which are heavily debated in the public forum. However, the issues of moderate or lower controversy demonstrated a more "normally" distributed opinion choice pattern, illustrating the way public opinion moderates when a question is out of the arena of public debate. The mediating factor "issue controversy" is believed to account for a failure to fully confirm the second hypothesis.
In an attempt to determine whether the public really understands the meaning of the disclaimer statement following the published results of the "Sound-Off" poll, this study asked respondents to indicate to what degree they believed the Sentinel's results were representative of Central Florida's opinion. The assumption on the part of the author is that if the Sentinel disclaimer was an adequate warning, those who hear the disclaimer should be alerted that the results quoted cannot be generalized to the entire population of Central Florida residents.

As reported above, an overwhelming majority of respondents did not realize that a non-scientifically sampled poll of opinion does not constitute a reliable measure of true public opinion on an issue: 70% of respondents believed that the Sentinel's figures represented the true opinions of the community on the Lethal Injection issue. Thus, the author has concluded that the disclaimer statement employed by the Sentinel is inadequate for its true meaning is misunderstood (or disregarded) by the public.

A few rival explanations for this finding are possible: (a) respondents may have realized that the call-in poll was not scientifically conducted, but had reason to believe that the Sentinel's findings were the same as the true opinion of the community anyway, or (b) respondents interpreted the author's question to mean "how much do you trust the Sentinel as a news source?", believing that an expression of mistrust in the "Sound-Off" figures would be registered as an expression of general mistrust in the Sentinel. Data obtained from Q 5 help to defeat these and other rival explanations.
Responses from the open-ended question which sought to know the reasons why those sampled trusted or mistrusted the Sentinel's figures confirmed the author's conclusion: respondents do not understand the disclaimer statement, or disregard its warning when reading or hearing poll reports. In this study, only 10% of respondents stated that they realized the Sentinel poll was not scientific, not random, or contained sampling bias. Of this 10%, one quarter indicated that they still trusted the Sentinel's findings, even though they realized that the poll lacked internal validity. Most of these explained the apparent inconsistency in their answers by stating that they believed the sample which the Sentinel drew was so large as to eliminate biasing effects. Thus, the possible rival explanation that respondents did understand the disclaimer but had some compelling reason to believe the Sentinel poll anyway is unfounded on the basis of these findings.

The second rival explanation seems more plausible: repudiation of the "Sound-Off" poll equates to a repudiation of the Sentinel in the eyes of respondents. However, the findings of this study do not bear out this explanation either. Only 13% of respondents equated the poll results with the reputation of the Sentinel—and one of these took a negative track, saying that they did not trust the "Sound-Off" poll findings because they believed the Sentinel to be a biased paper.

By far the most common explanation for why the majority of respondents in this study believed the "Sound-Off" poll to be representative was because the results of the poll on the Lethal Injection issue agreed with their own beliefs or with what they perceived to be the community's
belief. Yet in testing $H_4$ which seems to relate to this finding, the author found no significant difference between respondents' personal opinions about the issue and a tendency to disregard the disclaimer statement. Nevertheless, this failure to find a significant correlation is the result of the strong tendency for all types of opinion holders to trust the Sentinel poll findings.

The question of poll effects was answered on several levels by the present study, although further, directed research on this question is in order. Research question 1 directly posed the question of what effects poll reports have on those who read or hear them and then make opinion choices on the issues. A significant number of respondents in this study did make final opinion choices on the Lethal Injection issue in the direction of the majority opinion reported in the Sentinel poll. Further, in analyzing those who changed their opinion on the Lethal Injection issue from the first time the question was asked in the beginning of the interview to the last time the question was asked after hearing the "Sound-Off" report, significantly more changed in the direction of the reported "majority opinion" than in the opposite direction. It must be noted that these findings are based upon rather limited data. A further research question, $Q_3$, which sought to determine whether educational level or occupational background mediated the poll's effects upon opinion formation proved inconclusive. The question of poll effects constitutes the most promising area of future research, particularly lending itself to designs such as this.
It has been long believed by pollsters that demographic characteristics are important determinants of respondents' opinions. Most public opinion interviews require the respondent to furnish a detailed profile of himself, often with no more explanation than that the personal information is used for "classification purposes." But recently critics have suggested that the importance of demographics has been overstressed by pollsters—often to the embarrassment of respondents who do not like to reveal personal information to strangers (Wheeler, 1976). In the present study, the mediating effects of a few demographic characteristics were studied in relation to respondents' understanding of the Sound-Off disclaimer statement. Respondent educational level, occupational experience and newspaper reading habits were solicited in an effort to determine how each of these factors interacted with a respondent's likelihood of perceiving the true meaning of the call-in poll results. As Q<sub>4</sub> revealed, education was a significant determinant in understanding poll results, with the most highly educated respondents being the most astute in interpreting the content of the "Sound-Off" story. However, the other demographic factors failed to explain for differences in levels of respondents' understanding of the poll. The apparent conclusion of these findings for Q<sub>4</sub> and Q<sub>6</sub> is that demographic characteristics are not the determinants of opinion and behavior which the pollsters have come to believe.
Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

As indicated above, the area of poll effects is a topic which has received much critical attention, but little scientific study. Results from this study indicate that the polls may have an effect upon the later opinion formation of those who read or hear poll reports, but the findings are certainly not conclusive. One suggestion for future research which follows from this study is a time series study of opinion formation, change and endurance in response to poll information. Such a study would chart both the degree and form of media exposure of respondents (focusing upon the consumption of public opinion polls as reading or viewing material) and compare this exposure with opinions on issues over time. Based upon the findings of this study it might be hypothesized that the level of salience of any given issue over time will interact with the ability of the public opinion poll to shape the opinions of news consumers.

Another concern of the critics of media-sponsored polls is that the press will expand the use of its own polls, disregarding or down-playing the results of other (sometimes more scientifically controlled) studies. To further examine this implication, content analyses should be conducted using newspapers which have established their own polls to determine (a) if the results from rival polls are given equal time and, more importantly, (b) whether editorial bias is reflected in the selection of poll topics or in the analysis of poll results.

Studies such as the one reported here and the two proposed above are not conducted in a spirit of suspicion or punitiveness. To the
contrary, it is the purpose of this author and others who study the press to provide insights and suggestions for enhancing the role of the press in modern society. We stand at the outskirts of a marvelous, awesome new world where information is the meaningful currency. In the past, the press and the research community which studies social behavior have been guardians and champions of the rights of the masses to access the information which influences their lives. There is every reason to believe that this history will repeat itself. But there is also reason for concern that we, the information brokers of the future, monitor ourselves and each other to insure that the best interests of the public continue to be served by the journalistic and research professions. Without self-monitoring and accepting the constructive criticism of related professionals, we come dangerously close to being forced to accept the third option: outside regulation. This, we recognize as nothing less than the loss of freedom.
SUMMARY

The study reported herein sampled 215 individuals from the Greater Orlando area. Results from this telephone interview were used to compare the findings of a scientifically conducted "poll" against the findings of a media-sponsored, call-in "poll" and to test the effect which poll data may have upon those who read poll reports in their local newspaper. To this purpose, four hypotheses and six research questions were posed. The results of this study are as follows:

1) Hypothesis 1 - partially confirmed. As predicted, results from the newspaper's call-in poll differed significantly from the results of the scientifically sampled poll on questions of higher controversy. However, on one of the lower controversy questions the newspaper poll's findings differed significantly from the findings of the scientific poll, lending only partial support to the latter half of the first hypothesis.

2) Hypothesis 2 - not confirmed. It was expected that a 5-point Likert-type scale used to measure opinion on the five issues tested in this study would reveal that opinion on these issues is distributed somewhat "normally", even though the newspaper poll reported that community opinion on these issues was polarized or skewed. The findings of this study indicated that on the higher controversy issues, opinions on the 5-point scale were polarized or skewed, but on the lower controversy
issues, opinions on the 5-point scale were more normally distributed.

3) Hypothesis 3 - confirmed. As predicted, 70% of respondents believed that the poll report data was representative of the true opinions of the community. That is, in spite of the disclaimer statement which accompanied the report of the call-in poll's results, a majority of those sampled in this study believed that the newspaper call-in poll findings represented the true opinions of the community "very well" or "pretty well."

4) Hypotheses 4 - not confirmed. The anticipated interaction effect was not found. Respondents who initially held opinions similar to the majority opinion reported in the newspaper poll were not more likely than others to believe that the call-in poll's findings were representative of true public opinion.

5) Research Question 1. It was found that those who tended to believe the newspaper poll also tended to express final opinions on the issue in line with the majority opinion reported in the newspaper poll report. Further, among those respondents who changed their opinions on the issue after hearing the results of the newspaper poll, a significant number changed in the direction of the majority opinion reported in the call-in poll results.
6) Research Question 2. A majority of respondents did not believe that their final opinion on the issue was influenced by the newspaper poll results.

7) Research Question 3. Educational background and occupational level do not appear to mediate the poll report's ability to influence public opinion.

8) Research Question 4. A significant difference was discovered between respondents with varying levels of education and their perceptions of the call-in poll's adequacy as a barometer of public opinion, whereby those with more education were more likely to mistrust the results of the call-in poll. Occupational level was not found to influence the degree to which respondents trusted or mistrusted the call-in poll findings.

9) Research Question 5. Among those who stated that they believed in call-in poll's results to be representative of true public opinion, most replied they felt this way because the poll's findings corresponded to their own belief on the issue, or with their own perceptions of the public's opinion on the issue. Among those who stated that they believed the call-in poll's results were not representative of true public opinion, most replied that only certain "types" of people would take the time to call in an opinion to such a poll, so the sample was biased. Only a small percentage of respondents recognized that the call-in poll was not scientifically sampled.
10) Research Question 6. Frequent readers of the newspaper who sponsor the call-in poll were not more likely than others to trust the poll's findings. Nor were respondents who said they had taken part in the call-in poll themselves more likely than others to believe the results to be representative of the community's opinion.
APPENDIX 1
"CONTROVERSY" MANIPULATION CHECK

Below are some questions which have been discussed in the news in the past year. For each question, please indicate the degree of controversy of the issue using the 7-point scale under each question. Place an (x) mark above the position that represents your evaluation of the controversy level of each question. Be sure to rate the controversy of each question.

1) Would you take a pay cut if your employer faced bankruptcy?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extremely Controversial</th>
<th>Not at all Controversial</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2) Who makes the best cars—Detroit or Japan?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extremely Controversial</th>
<th>Not at all Controversial</th>
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<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
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3) Should Florida's legal drinking age be raised to 21?

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4) Should handguns be banned in this country?

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5) Should Florida abolish the death penalty?

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6) Do you think there will be a nuclear war in your lifetime?

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7) Should driving be allowed on Florida's beaches?

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8) Should Florida adopt lethal injection as its method of execution?

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9) Should college football have a playoff system to choose a national champion?

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10) Do you think Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy?

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11) Should the feds step in to save severely handicapped infants?

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</table>
Hello, I'm from the Communication department of the University of Central Florida. We are conducting a study of public opinion on some issues in the news and your participation is very important.

1) Are you a resident of the Orlando area? y n

2) Are you over 18 years of age? y n (terminate)

In a moment I am going to read you some questions which have been discussed in the local and national news recently. After I read each question, I will ask your opinion. To make things easier, I would like you to use a number from 1 to 5 to express your opinion on each question. If you give me the number 1, that means a strong yes to the question; the number 2 means a moderate yes; the number 3 means you are unsure; the number 4 means a moderate no and the number 5 means a strong no to the question. Remember you can give me any number between 1 and 5 to express how strongly you feel about each issue. Are you ready?

3) Should handguns be banned in this country? (Remember to give me a number from 1 to 5 where 1 means a strong yes and 5 means a strong no.)
   1  2  3  4  5

4) Should driving be allowed on Florida's beaches?
   1  2  3  4  5

5) Should Florida adopt lethal injection as its method of execution?
   1  2  3  4  5

6) Should Florida's legal drinking age be raised to 21?
   1  2  3  4  5

7) Should college football have a playoff system to choose a national champion?
   1  2  3  4  5
Now, if you had to decide one way or the other today, based upon the information you have, would you say yes or no to the question:

8) Should handguns be banned in this country? y n dk

9) Should driving be allowed on Florida's beaches? y n dk

10) Should Florida's legal drinking age be raised to 21? y n dk

11) Should college football have a playoff system to choose a national champion? y n dk

A recent edition of the Orlando Sentinel reported that of the 1119 callers who responded to the Sentinel's Sound Off poll, 819, or 73% believed that Florida should adopt lethal injection as its method of execution; 300 callers, or 27% believed that Florida should not adopt lethal injection as its method of execution. The weekly phone-in question is not a scientific sampling, but it can reflect the intensity of readers' feelings.

12) How well do you think the Orlando Sentinel poll which I just read reveals Central Florida's opinion on the issue? Do you think the poll reveals Central Florida's opinions?
   a. very well
   b. pretty well
   c. not very well
   d. not at all well

13) Why do you feel that way?

14) If you had to decide one way or the other today, based upon the information you have, would you say yes or no to the question:

   Should Florida adopt lethal injection as its method of execution? y n dk

15) How much do you think your decision was influenced by knowing how some members of your community feel about this issue? Do you think your decision was influenced:
   a. a great deal
   b. somewhat
   c. not very much
   d. not at all
16) Do you read newspapers? y  n  dk
17) Which newspapers do you read?

18) Have you ever read the Orlando Sentinel's Sound Off feature? y  n  dk
19) Have you ever called in your opinion to the Sentinel poll? y  n  dk
20) What is the highest level of education you have completed?
   a. some grade school    e. some college
   b. completed grade school  f. college graduate
   c. some high school     g. some graduate or
   d. high school graduate  professional training
   h. graduate degree
21) What is your occupation?
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