AAPOR and the Media

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The linkages between public opinion research and the press have been close and continuous. The earliest political theorists and writers on public opinion invariably made the press a central element in their analyses as mirrors or shapers of elite or mass sentiments that had political importance. Decades before the “modern” era of opinion research began to take shape, newspapers and magazines often acted as largely uncritical channels for and sometime practitioners of what Frederick Stephan, a Princeton University social scientist and past president of AAPOR, once termed “primitive opinion surveys,” because of their presumed human-interest appeal to readers. “Man in the street” interviews and horse race reporting based on straw polls supplemented the then-conventional sources of political wisdom: party officials, pundits, and local editors.

Press treatment of subsequent political and opinion polls built upon these early practices. The pioneering work over several decades by the *Literary Digest* (prior to its disastrously wrong 1936 election prediction), the *Fortune* polls by Elmo Roper, and the Gallup syndicated newspaper polls (initiated in 1935) illustrate the key sponsorship role played by the press in the evolution of polling prior to World War II (Converse, 1987).

When AAPOR was first organized, therefore, it was hardly accidental that pollsters and market researchers working for or in media (print and broadcast) organizations were among its founding members. At Central City, for example, in addition to those who did news polls or market and media research for the national media (e.g., *Life, Reader’s Digest*, CBS, and NBC), there were directors of three state polls sponsored by local newspapers, as well as others with news polling or public relations responsibilities. Three of the conference’s panels dealt with issues in press-polling relationships: one on technical and ethical standards (it called for “good polling practices and high standards of reporting” to the public); one on local survey problems (with reports by directors of the Iowa, Texas, and Minnesota polls); and one on news-
paper research (with a focus on survey applications to readership issues). Thus, whether one considers the long history of public opinion studies or the narrower time span covered by AAPOR’s existence as a professional association, the mass media have always played a central role.

**Reporting the Polls: The Struggle for Disclosure Standards**

One thread that winds through the history of AAPOR’s efforts to promote professionalism in the conduct of surveys and greater public understanding of opinion research is the struggle to achieve reporting of poll results that is full, accurate, and readily understood. This objective was only one aspect of the broader goal of promoting high standards of professional conduct, both ethically and technically. But its scope was constrained by the fact that in the early years of polling the data were mostly proprietary. Dissemination of survey results was the prerogative of the press or other private research sponsors. Yet, as the Central City pioneers clearly recognized, the future status of public opinion research (including market research) was going to be significantly affected by how polling and survey data were treated by the media. Gallup, for example, asked subscribers to his syndicated polling feature to print it verbatim. But editorial discretion was widely exercised in handling poll results. Not surprisingly, then, the topic of how to set “disclosure” standards that would improve reporting became a staple of professional dialogues in AAPOR and other survey research-based associations.

The media’s role in sponsoring or publicizing polls expanded over the ensuing decades. A new, discordant note was increasingly struck in the press in the wake of the 1948 polling debacle and the publication of Lindsay Rogers’ *The Pollsters* (1949). Criticisms of polling as a pseudoscience were further fed by political columnists’ and reporters’ concerns over the threat of usurpation. Press hostility toward polls typically was epitomized at election times by articles on “how the polls got it wrong,” a practice observable in day-after election stories.

This was part of a larger sea change in the political process that became apparent in the 1960 campaign. The political parties were losing their authority over electoral politics, the print news media were being challenged by TV coverage (and politicians’ zealous pursuit of TV cameras), and polling was being integrated into election campaign plan-
ning at all levels. Polling, initially a media-sponsored or media-dependent activity, had by the 1960s become a technology useful to individual candidates in gaining and retaining political office and in governing. For a time the media were ill-equipped to compete with this flowering of political uses (Mendelsohn and Crespi, 1970; Gollin, 1980b; Roll and Cantril, 1980).

Set against this background, the “disclosure” issue can be seen as a struggle about control over the release of public opinion data to the public as well as about how to educate the press and public concerning the hallmarks of a professionally conducted survey. Once adopted, minimum standards for reporting (disclosing) results could have the effect of putting poll sponsors and public pollsters in the uncomfortable position of self-indictment if they were seen to have departed from the use of sound methodology.

It should not be forgotten that from the earliest days of survey research, those with professional training and scruples were forced to contend with fly-by-night pollsters, fast-buck purveyors of rubbish, and manipulators of the press who leaked partial or false results for partisan gain. The fear of Gresham’s law applying to their own commercial polling activities was a lively one for this infant industry’s pioneers. Academic researchers shared commercial pollsters’ desire to elevate standards of reporting, especially as they became aware of the fact that media accounts of their attitude and opinion research would inevitably be colored by the treatment of poll results.

First Steps: The Early Years

At the time of the 1946 Central City conference, reports to commercial clients typically were fairly sparse in their treatment of survey methodology. Neither the press nor sponsors of proprietary studies had much of a background for evaluating critically what was a still-evolving set of survey research procedures for sampling, interviewing, and analyzing and interpreting data. Given these ambiguous circumstances, the call within AAPOR for standards of disclosure had a dual purpose: of educating survey practitioners, sponsors, and reporters as to the key dimensions affecting the quality of any poll or opinion survey, and of elevating expectations about good reporting.

Julian Woodward, an associate of Roper, led off a Central City panel on standards by noting that George Gallup, Archibald Crossley, and Elmo Roper had been talking for some time about forming an association of “public opinion reporters . . . agencies now reporting poll results through the media of communications.” He expanded on this
idea by identifying a series of issues that a committee on standards of such an association might wish to address. Another idea was for an “auditing committee” that would actively monitor and pass judgments on all pre-election polls. One of the duties of the latter, Gallup provocatively noted during the panel discussion, might be “to determine the most accurate poll, in each election, in order to eliminate the welter of confusing claims” (National Opinion Research Center, 1946). He never relinquished this idea; some twenty years later it was a prominent element of his plan for a new standards-setting group.

Some market researchers expressed opposition to any broad “auditing” function, preferring that it be restricted to polls affecting the public welfare. A lively discussion ensued on how such standards might be used to “prevent newspapers and other media from distorting the findings of polls in publication.” Stuart Dodd noted that a public education effort could help create a public able to “demand the highest standards of newspapers reporting poll findings.” George Gallup summarized the discussion by defining a “minimum reporting requirement” for newspapers, consisting of three elements: “at least the question wording and type and size of the sample.”

The momentum achieved by the Central City conference carried over to the Williamstown meeting of opinion researchers in 1947. But the initiative that had been launched to draft a set of standards for research organizations, following the Gallup-Woodward lead, was subordinated to the work that led to the creation of both AAPOR and WAPOR. After some debate, both were founded as associations with individuals (rather than firms or organizations) as their members. Julian Woodward noted some years later that having firms as members would have confounded the relationship between commercial and academic members. That decision had implications for the shaping of reporting standards, making it harder to locate the responsibility for compliance inasmuch as individual members might not have the final say in media or corporate decisions about what or how to report.

At Williamstown, the debate was also joined over performance versus ethical conduct as alternative bases for standard-setting. Many felt that technical performance standards were impossible to codify; others felt that ethical standards alone would be meaningless. (As Daniel Katz was to note in a 1950 Standards Committee report, “The former would have required setting down in some rigid terms what constitutes good and bad research,” adding diplomatically that “previous committees have had considerable trouble in getting agreement in this area.”) In contrast with either of these two, reporting/disclosure requirements
proved to be a relatively uncontroversial issue and further work was undertaken to expand the list of three elements that Gallup had proposed at Central City.

When members of the newly constituted AAPOR met again in 1948 at Eagles Mere to ratify their draft constitution, they were confronted with two sets of standards proposals that had been prepared in the interim by Archibald Crossley and representatives of five other market research firms. These proposals were an outgrowth of an independent standards-setting effort by two established groups: the Market Research Council and the New York chapter of the American Marketing Association. The overlapping memberships among these marketing professionals and the Central City and Williamstown AAPOR activists made it a natural step for these standards proposals to be put before AAPOR’s members for possible adoption.

The first set, a draft “code of professional practices” for market research organizations, provoked much debate as to their substance, enforceability, and their relevance to individuals. By way of contrast, the second set, “standards of practice to be used in the reporting of survey results,” simply made reference to “every report of a survey” and “the main body of every report.” (Using the passive voice finessed the issue of whether the injunctions applied to individuals or to organizations.) It is instructive to review the list of seven points covered in that 1948 disclosure standards draft, because almost all of them survived in successive drafts over the years. Included were the purpose of the survey; for whom and by whom it was conducted; the universe covered; size and nature of the sample and any weighting methods; time of field work; personal or mail interviews; field staff and control methods. The draft concluded, “The report also should contain the full questionnaire and findings, bases of percentages, and the distribution of interviews.”

The only action taken with respect to these proposals, after lengthy discussion of a motion offered by Philip Hauser, AAPOR’s first Standards Committee chair, was simply to “commend” the two documents to the membership “as an initial step in the development of standards” (AAPOR, 1948). But it was clearly recognized that at some point AAPOR would have to move beyond this temporizing, ambivalent stance.

In June 1949 AAPOR met again, in Ithaca, this time in the wake of the 1948 pre-election polling debacle. On the same day that a postmortem session was held (with Crossley, Gallup, and Roper as speakers), a session chaired by AAPOR’s Standards Committee chairman, Daniel Katz, once again confronted the dilemmas posed by a code of professional ethics and practices. A formal paper read by Alfred McClung
Lee, a Standards Committee member, was accompanied by the informal but no less sagacious remarks of a panel of discussants. Lee’s paper (1949) reviewed earlier efforts to develop and adopt a code, and then analyzed some requirements for implementing codes of professional conduct. During the discussion Paul Lazarsfeld suggested the use of a slower, more inductive approach: “I feel that standards are best developed in the discussion of concrete cases. The Standards Committee should have cases submitted to it, examine them, and then express an opinion which will tend to become law” (AAPOR, 1949). At another point Daniel Katz noted that “there was no problem in setting up standards for public reporting. The problem was what we should do in addition to this.”

Notwithstanding their seemingly uncontroversial status, the fate of the previously “commended” reporting standards remained hostage to the adoption of a broader code of professional conduct by AAPOR. The struggle to define and gain acceptance for a code of conduct and for standards to be used in reporting survey data proceeded fitfully from those first critical years right through the 1950s, with much doubling back as a result of organizational amnesia and frequent changes of players. (See Sidney Hollander’s chapter on AAPOR standards.) But a strong sensitivity to the media’s growing use and frequent abuse of polls continued to manifest itself in the annual programs of AAPOR and in the minutes of successive Council meetings. In a sense, these concerns were deliberately built into the associational life of AAPOR. Its constitution defined Public Relations and Standards as two of only five standing committees that were initially established.

The interrelated need to build public understanding and to improve media treatment of polls was reflected in various proposals made to AAPOR Council over the years. For example, in 1951 Julian Woodward suggested that AAPOR call a conference of free-lance writers and scientific editors with the idea of “feeding” social science materials to them, to gain greater publicity for public opinion research. A few months later, in 1952, Louis Harris (chairman of the Publications Committee and Woodward’s colleague at Elmo Roper’s firm) proposed that AAPOR sponsor an annual conference of editors, publishers, and media people. He also pressed for an exploration of television as a medium for publicizing social science (polling) data. These were the germs of an “educational outreach” role for AAPOR, resurrected unsuccessfully from time to time, that finally became a key rationale for the National Council on Public Polls more than a decade later. The summer training programs for journalists developed subsequently at several
college and university survey research centers (e.g., Williams, Michigan, Ohio State, Connecticut) might also be seen to have had their origins in those early AAPOR program proposals.

Pressures to formalize and adopt a code continued to build throughout the 1950s, especially in relation to respondent anonymity safeguards. By 1958 a draft "Code of Professional Ethics and Practices," patterned on the first of the two codes devised by the Crossley committee, which had been "commended" to the members ten years earlier, was presented to Council for adoption by Robert Ford, Chairman of the Standards Committee, and then proposed to the membership. The draft version produced few reactions; some amendments were subsequently made "from the standpoint of editorial style and structure," as Leo Bogart (then chairing the Standards Committee) put it. The revised code was circulated for a full year before winning adoption by the membership at AAPOR's meeting in Atlantic City in May 1960. Once an initial review of alleged violations by the Standards Committee had been conducted, the job of enforcing AAPOR's first code was left to the discretion of Council. No explicit procedures existed to guide the deliberations of either body. Moreover, the second of the two codes drafted by Crossley's committee, which had defined reporting (disclosure) requirements, was not part of the new AAPOR code. But the first step had finally been taken, and others were to follow later in the decade.

AAPOR and NCPP: Disclosure Standards and Educational Efforts

The rising tide of political polls in the 1960s generated further demands for the improvement of poll reporting in the media. Several blatant cases of contradictory or self-serving polls added fuel to the reformist fires. In 1965, Rome Arnold, who chaired the Public Relations Committee, drew the Council's attention to adverse publicity about survey research appearing in the mass media, which he feared might reduce respondent cooperation. Helen Dinerman, Publications Committee chair, also called attention to the need for a booklet to explain public opinion research to state and local legislators.

The strong ties being forged among polls, politics, and the mass media forced the Council to confront the problem of pseudopolls that were appearing in the media. For example, in 1965 it passed a resolution deploring the use of the term "pre-election poll" as a means of characterizing street-corner interviews and other straw-balloting de-
vices used by the news media. This action was followed in 1966 by another resolution deploring “the serious and prominent attention given by the mass media” to such so-called polls. Both actions had been heavily influenced by a misguided New York Herald Tribune straw poll.

The urge to extend the scope of AAPOR’s professional standards by exerting greater control over poll reporting came to a climax of sorts in 1967, in response to two main sources of pressure. One was a memorandum to the Standards Committee by AAPOR members Edwin Parker, William Nichols II, and Michael Phillips, calling for a “minimum set of standards for reporting the methods of publicly released opinion polls which should prove of benefit to reputable polling agencies, to decision makers in the mass media, and to the public at large.” It was generated by outrage over a highly-publicized case involving two conflicting California election polls. The Parker memo used the public’s interest as consumers of poll data as a basis for their proposals, which included a set of reporting requirements and guarantees of public access to data and methods on demand that went well beyond anything that had been suggested in earlier draft codes. It suggested further that if the Standards Committee felt that AAPOR was not “an appropriate sponsoring agency” it should explore the possibility of setting up an “independent association of public opinion polling agencies willing to subscribe to such a code.”

This veiled threat was all too real at the time to Irving Crespi, AAPOR’s Standards Committee Chairman. He advised his committee members in April 1967, and the Council a month later, of a plan that George Gallup was then actively pursuing to create a “national standards group for polling.” Gallup’s professed concern was with the strong possibility of governmental regulation in the absence of effective self-regulation by the profession. “AAPOR is in no position to take punitive action against those who fail to live up to standards,” Gallup wrote in April 1967 to prospective organizational members of this new association. The disclosure standards he was proposing were meant to govern “polling organizations whose findings regularly appear in print or on the air . . . also [those] that make private or public surveys for candidates and whose findings are released to the public.” It was clear from his prospectus that the prestige of membership (with all that it implied for credentialling) was thought to be sufficient to recruit public polling agencies, while the threat of punitive sanctions (ranging from a reprimand to expulsion) would reinforce their adherence to its disclosure standards.
Gallup's proposed reporting requirements could have surprised no one familiar with the twenty-year history of efforts to devise a code. They included the elements proposed by the Crossley committee back in 1947: the name of the polling organization; population covered; sampling procedures and interview methods; area surveyed; exact question wording; sponsor of the survey; and time of interviewing. But this time implementation and enforcement procedures were sketched out in considerable detail. Also included were some requirements for fuller disclosure of methods when necessary to adjudicate a complaint. Among these was the following: "Any other technical details that would help explain why polling results of one organization do not agree with those of another, when they differ." Gallup was thus restating his concern with the issue he had raised at Central City, a concern heightened by the proliferation of polling agencies in the intervening years, of a "welter of confusing claims."

For some time Gallup had been speaking out about the need to find a way of exerting some kind of peer pressure or exercising discipline over pollsters who misused the method or who leaked partial or incorrect results in order to gain advantage for some political candidate-client. As his private correspondence file makes clear, he was taking aim at a few pollsters in particular, hoping to draw them into a group that could then exert peer influence over their activities. Those he had initially invited to join were categorized as "white hats," "grey hats," or "black hats" in his private listing. He proposed an initial meeting to consider his proposal at AAPOR's annual meeting at Lake George in May 1967, but settled for a meeting at the Princeton Club in New York City just prior to the meeting.

For its part, AAPOR had not been idle in this period. Irv Crespi led the Standards Committee in drafting "standards of disclosure concerning public opinion polls." They represented an amalgam of the Parker memo and Gallup proposals, constrained by the fact that AAPOR's membership was composed of individuals and not public polling agencies, and further that as a matter of settled policy AAPOR membership could not be cited as proof of professional competence. The latter was a benefit implied in the 1967 Gallup proposal and affirmed in actual practice once the new association was formed.

As a senior staff member of the Gallup Organization, Crespi was in a unique position to act as a broker of ideas about standards and to assess the applicability of these parallel proposals to various segments of the polling profession. He brought a draft proposal to Council,
meeting at the Sagamore Hotel on Lake George, where it was anxiously debated in the full knowledge of Gallup's continuing efforts to found a group with the aim of establishing and enforcing a set of standards for the public release of survey or poll information.

After considerable discussion the Council adopted in principle the draft "Standards of Disclosure." It was promptly presented to the membership for discussion, revised, and finally adopted by the Council at a meeting in September 1967 and issued to the membership at the 1968 annual conference in Santa Barbara. (Since this was a purely advisory statement, and thus not a part of the AAPOR code or by-laws, Council ruled that it did not need to be submitted to the membership for a formal vote.) As the second item on that Council meeting's agenda, President Leo Bogart directed that the minutes note "that the Council discussed [the Gallup proposal for a new self-policing group] with considerable concern."

In September 1968 AAPOR was drawn into a related attempt made by Gallup to investigate "current differences in published poll results on the presidential race" between Harris and Sindlinger polls compared with those of his own firm. This was the so-called Rossi Committee on Political Polls, appointed at Gallup's suggestion by AAPOR's president Robert Ford, but which dissolved several months after it had been formed. (This committee and its history are discussed in greater detail in Kathleen Frankovic's chapter on AAPOR and the polls.) But AAPOR's rapid action had once again put it at the forefront as a promulgator of codes. Its new disclosure standards ultimately became a prime source for those adopted by the "National Committee on Published Polls" once this committee was formally constituted in June 1968 with Arch Crossley as its first executive secretary. NCPP was reorganized and renamed the National Council on Public Polls (NCPP) in May 1969.

Since then, AAPOR and NCPP have undertaken a number of campaigns and activities designed to educate the press, politicians, and the public as to the hallmarks of professionally conducted polls. These activities have been both proactive and reactive. Various bills were introduced in Congress, beginning with a "truth in polling" act proposed by Congressman Lucien Nedzi of Michigan in 1968—by his account the first federal attempt to "regulate" polls since a bill proposed in 1943 by Senator Gerald Nye that would have required pollsters to disclose the size of their sample and preserve all records for two years (Nedzi, 1971). Representatives of the two associations were invited many times to testify before congressional committees, to argue
against efforts such as Nedzi’s in 1968 and again late in 1971 (Committee on House Administration, 1973), or to oppose other regulatory bills, such as the one introduced by New York’s Senator Charles Goodell after his defeat in a senatorial election in 1970 in which a Daily News straw poll allegedly played a role. (Other polls released at the time showed different horse race results.) Goodell’s draft bill would, among other things, have required full disclosure of procedures when a poll was challenged during an election campaign.

Press releases on AAPOR’s “Standards for Reporting Public Opinion Polls” and on NCPP’s “Principles of Disclosure” were reissued periodically and sent to legislators and editors, usually when new situations arose that called for a response by the opinion research profession. As adopted, the AAPOR statement (which defined minimal disclosure standards) continued to be directed toward “all survey research organizations,” rather than to its own members. The pronouncements issued by AAPOR from time to time were mainly hortatory. They urged the news media to request and publicize the items called for by its standards for minimal disclosure, or recommended other actions that the media or survey organizations could take that would result (as the Parker memo had suggested) in broader public access to survey materials. But unlike NCPP, AAPOR did not initially develop a set of procedures that could result in sanctioning violators of its reporting standards. That came about only in 1984 (see below), when AAPOR undertook to revise its code, and transformed those disclosure standards into a set of professional obligations binding upon individual AAPOR members—thus reconnecting the two components of the professional standards issue that had been debated during AAPOR’s earliest days.

The uncertain sway of AAPOR’s 1968 disclosure standards was reflected in commentaries made about them at the time and subsequently. At AAPOR’s annual meeting in 1970, for example, Nedzi, Mervin Field, and Philip Meyer all took note of certain newly-adopted standards. In introducing the POQ segment containing the three sets of remarks, President-elect Sidney Hollander (1971) noted that the session at which the three had spoken had been specially requested by Council after it had been confronted with four cases of alleged code infractions in one year. He pointed to two recent actions by AAPOR that were responsive to such problems. One was the adoption of disclosure standards “which require the poller to present designated facts . . . necessary for evaluating the results.” A second action “places affirmative responsibility on the researcher for accurate reporting of his findings,
even for retraction or correction in case of misleading presentation by client or press.”

Mervin Field (1971) gave a slightly different account of the new AAPOR disclosure standards, defining them as a “significant addition to its Code of Professional Ethics and Practices.” Both of these veterans of code debates knew that AAPOR did not accord the same status to the two codes (of ethical conduct and minimal disclosure), nor did it then have reliable procedures in place for enforcing either of them. Uncertain interpretations of the status of the same documents such as these may have been a byproduct of the succession of actions taken by AAPOR in a brief time span, under the spur of necessity and competitive pressures.

The second action noted by Hollander constituted an amendment to the AAPOR Code (not to its disclosure standards), which had been finally approved in June 1970. It had been stimulated by an incident in 1967 involving deliberately-leaked Crossley poll results purportedly making President Lyndon Johnson look stronger against various Republican challengers (see Bogart, 1985 and Altschuler, 1986), as well as other flagrant cases of partial release of poll results designed to mislead press, politicians, and the general public at strategic points during a political campaign. In his AAPOR speech, reporter Phil Meyer (1971) had identified the leaked political poll as the problem case par excellence for journalist and pollster alike, and pointed out that “strictly interpreted, the new AAPOR disclosure rule requires the researcher to set such a distortion straight.” This might require him or her to breach client confidentiality, another requirement of the code, thereby setting up an intolerable ethical conflict.

That 1970 addition to the AAPOR Code of Professional Ethics and Practices had a curious fate subsequently. It was modified over the next fifteen years by successive code revisions, becoming first less and then more precise in its language in response to the changing nature of cases of abuse of survey and poll data in politics and elsewhere, and to the problems (cited by Meyer and others) that the standard posed for pollsters working as hired hands in partisan contexts. But what was apparent throughout this period was the fact that AAPOR was moving steadily to strengthen and elevate its expectations of professional conduct, especially in cases when poll data entered the public domain.

During the 1970s suggestions were made and plans proposed to convene seminars for journalists or to prepare a primer on what people ought to know in order to interpret polls properly. These often came about in response to requests emanating from media sources. In 1973,
for example, Robert Bower (then both an AAPOR Council member and president of NCPP) expressed interest in the idea of a primer on polling on behalf of NCPP. The seminar idea, sporadically pursued but never carried out by AAPOR, was finally realized in May 1976, when NCPP (under Albert Cantril’s leadership) convened a well-attended day-long seminar on “Polls about Politics” at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. It was, in fact, cosponsored by AAPOR, and ten of the twelve speakers were prominent AAPOR members. The videotaped speeches given at the seminar were used on college campuses for some time to teach students about survey research. Another NCPP-organized seminar, devoted to “Polling on the Issues,” was held in November 1979 at the Washington Post. Once again, AAPOR members played prominent roles as speakers (see Cantril, 1980). The fact that both organizations numbered most of the same leading opinion researchers among their officers and membership ranks made for a natural and highly fruitful division of labor. NCPP, with its close ties to Washington-area press and political institutions at the time, was in a better position to organize such efforts. Smaller seminars on press-polling issues were organized by NCPP in 1983, 1984, and 1987. Although unsuccessful attempts have been made by NCPP on other occasions to organize seminars, it remains as a key educational outreach program, aimed primarily at journalists and congressional staff members.

Reporting standards took on an independent life as they continued to be disseminated to the news media and, through AAPOR membership, to academic textbook writers on survey research and others who wrote books and articles on polling. Slowly but surely a consensus had formed that shaped norms governing the proper handling and reporting of poll and survey data. AAPOR’s standards were frequently cited in ethically oriented discussions in research organizations and in articles on good and poor reporting written for the guidance of the news media (e.g., Willhoit and Weaver, 1980). Perhaps the most obvious sign of influence was the nearly universal adoption of the hybrid (and debated) concept of “margin of error” in news media reporting of poll results.

AAPOR and the Media in the 1980s

The considerable gains in polling sophistication by research professionals and the media alike were displayed in a special symposium issue of POQ devoted to “Polls and the News Media,” which appeared
at the start of the 1980s. The lead article, written by its guest editor (Gollin, 1980a) examined the “liaison” between polling and the press, a term chosen to symbolize the intimate, seductive, and potentially dangerous relationships that had developed over the decades. As the symposium’s articles made clear, the millennium in poll reporting had hardly been reached, despite the diffusion of knowledge about polling and survey methods and the slow growth of poll reporting as a sometime journalistic specialty.

The institutionalization of news media polling was clearly observable in the steady expansion of polling done by the TV networks and by newspapers in major markets, in some cases as combined operations, for example, the CBS News/New York Times Poll (Gollin, 1987). From its earliest days AAPOR had news media pollsters as members—for example, Joe Belden of the Texas Poll, Jane Shepherd of the Washington Post’s Survey, Sid Goldish of the Minnesota Poll, Paul Trescott of the Philadelphia Inquirer, and Henry Kroeger of the Iowa Poll. But by the 1980s the volume of polling accounted for by the major news media (and many minor-league media operations) and above all their visibility made news media pollsters among the most strategically placed of all AAPOR members in the continuing struggle to elevate standards of reporting and to improve public understanding of opinion research. Pollsters such as Warren Mitofsky and Kathleen Frankovic of CBS News, Barry Sussman, then at the Washington Post, I.A. “Bud” Lewis of the Los Angeles Times, Glenn Roberts of the Iowa Poll, and Michael Kagay of the New York Times knew better than most how much room for improvement existed in most news polling operations, and they took an active part in AAPOR sessions and activities that further clarified the issues.

Poll data gathered by the news media and analyses of their polling practices provided a growing share of the program content at AAPOR’s annual meetings. In 1980, for example, plenary sessions were devoted to each of these topics. What soon emerged as the new issue of the 1980s, “exit polls,” was in fact a special case of an older concern with the bandwagon or underdog effects of publicized pre-election polls on prospective voters. But this time the effects to be examined were confined mainly to Western states’ voters, who might have heard TV news reports about the votes already registered in polls conducted in the populous and electoral vote-heavy Eastern and Midwestern states.

The exit polling controversy was amplified by the national reach of the TV networks’ polls and the copycat influence they exerted on news
media at the state and local level. Predictions and projections of voting outcomes filled the nation’s TV screens, augmenting the pre-election poll reports in the pages of daily papers and newsweeklies. “Horserace journalism,” an old criticism of the media’s favored slant on campaigns and elections, was given renewed force as poll data replaced the informed guesses of local political knowledgeable and pundits. The stream of poll results during the campaign turned into a flood on election night. Polls of sampled voters leaving their voting places gave the TV networks’ election-night coverage, and the press’s next-day stories, an immediacy and analytical power they had lacked in the days when the only basis for reporting was the actual count of votes cast, available only after delays that stretched the reporting period into the early hours of the morning or even days after the election.

But was exit polling good or bad for democracy, considered from the standpoint of its effects on voters’ motivations to turn out and vote? This issue soon became the basis for court challenges in several states and draft legislation at the federal level, reawakening an old anxiety in the minds of opinion researchers. AAPOR confronted this issue in a series of internal Council debates, culminating in a plenary session at its 1984 annual meeting, organized by Ronald Milavsky. A full house heard Congressman Alvin Swift of Washington, pollster and AAPOR stalwart Burns Roper, news executive Richard Salant, and civil liberties lawyer Floyd Abrams debate the issue and reveal its complexities. The proceedings of that session were eventually edited and published in POQ (Milavsky et al., 1985). With Council’s approval, 5,000 reprints were subsequently mailed to key legislators and officials at all levels of government as well as to newspaper editors, political columnists, and TV news producers.

One thing was new about the exit polling issue. Unlike the controversies surrounding poll reporting standards issues raised in earlier periods, the exit poll controversy assumed that the results being reported were accurate forecasts of voting outcomes, at least at the statewide level. (Some exit poll-based projections or “characterizations” do have to be revised in light of actual vote counts on election night.) The issue confronting the TV networks, therefore, is whether the poll results should be reported prior to the closing of all voting places. Despite an accommodating stance on their part, the TV networks still have the availability of hot news that they spent a lot of their money to gather, and competitive pressures, as dual incentives to make early use of exit poll data. As there is little likelihood of legal regulation of exit polling or of reporting of results, given the First Amendment’s protective
reach, the issue is likely to persist. (A standardized period of voting across time zones could remove the issue from controversy, but that seems to be hard to achieve.) To the extent that research on the effects of early reporting can clarify the issue or suggest other remedies, it is likely that AAPOR members will play a crucial role in gathering the data and assessing their implications.

Other media-related issues have assumed growing prominence at AAPOR’s annual meetings. New technology was a popular theme of program sessions in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as the computer led the way into an era of information explosion and glut, with wide-ranging effects on existing news and information media. A more conservative political climate led to a surge of interest in the issue of media credibility, and it was the topic of a plenary session at AAPOR in 1986. Media reporting of social science data (not only poll reporting) was another topic that found a receptive audience at AAPOR conferences (Weiss and Singer, 1987), and the AIDS epidemic brought renewed interest in information campaign effectiveness and the role of the mass media in shaping public opinion and social behavior relating to AIDS. In all these cases it has been the news media’s own polls that have provided much of the substance for the analysis of these issues at AAPOR conferences. And by depositing their polls at the Roper Center and other survey data repositories, the media have contributed greatly to scholarship on public opinion and politics as well. One further indicator of the close ties that exist between AAPOR and the media is the growing frequency with which members working in media organizations or at schools of journalism and mass communications have been selected to run for AAPOR Council posts.

Closing the Ring: AAPOR Revises Its Code

Another action taken by AAPOR in the 1980s finally brought about a rapprochement between the two largely parallel efforts to develop codes of professional conduct outlined in this chapter and in the one dealing with AAPOR’s standards. The earliest codes mainly reflected the concerns of AAPOR members from the commercial side, for whom public polling was not a compelling issue at the time. But the balance of concerns within AAPOR shifted over the years, helped in no small part by the correlated standard-setting efforts of other associations composed primarily of market researchers, for example, the American
Marketing Association, the Advertising Research Foundation, the Market Research Council, and the Council of American Survey Research Organizations. A growing number of cases sent for review by AAPOR’s Standards Committee involved political polls. The complaints often involved a combination of methodological issues and publicity actions on the part of either the polling agency or its client.

Such cases proved to be difficult to resolve within the code implementation framework available to AAPOR. Its reporting standards were hortatory, not part of the AAPOR Code around which formal enforcement procedures were organized. As had been foreseen in earlier debates, a polling firm risked being held liable for disclosure activities over which it may not have had full control. Other factors limited fuller disclosure. News media pollsters, for example, were hostages to the space or time constraints imposed by their media upon the reporting of poll data. Their reporting roles were subordinated to the judgments of the editors or news producers who made the final decisions. As it stood in the early 1980s, the AAPOR Code did not directly address such dilemmas.

As had been true at earlier junctures, the push to revise the Code depended chiefly on a serendipitous factor: the unusually long tenure of office of Barbara Bailar and Deborah Hensler as Standards Committee chair and associate chair. Their cumulative experience with standards cases over three or more years and their active role in stimulating discussions in Council and at annual meetings made it easier for them to identify gaps in the code and problems of application caused by outdated or carelessly worded provisions. Al Gollin’s periods of service on AAPOR Council overlapped with theirs, and as president he sought to help them deal directly with these issues, especially with the anomalous status of the disclosure standards. He convened a “constitutional convention” in November 1984 at which a diverse group of nearly twenty AAPOR members, under Debby Hensler’s leadership, spent a full day reviewing the codes of other research associations and vigorously debating the need to revise the scope and substance of AAPOR’s code.

The most significant recommendation adopted by the group was to incorporate the disclosure standards into the code. At the same time, various infelicities of style or ambiguities in the old code were removed, and the draft revision was sent to Council for review and approval early in 1985. Council adopted a phased strategy of membership review and approval, stretching the process of detailed, line-by-line review of the new code across the life of two successive Councils (1984-
85 and 1985-86). The membership was finally asked for a formal vote of approval of this change in AAPOR's by-laws, and gave it an overwhelmingly favorable verdict late in 1985.

With this vote the two distinct standards elements that had been defined four decades earlier as indispensable hallmarks by which public opinion research could begin to be adjudged a self-regulating profession were rejoined. This action only set the stage for the emergence of new issues and controversies that will make it necessary for additional steps to be taken by AAPOR: to enunciate and enforce standards; to educate the media, other strategic groups, and the general public as to proper polling and reporting practices; and to adapt to changes in survey technologies and in modes of diffusing survey findings to the wider society, as its members continue to pioneer in the systematic study of public opinion.

References

The author wishes to express his gratitude to the Estate of George Gallup, to Bud Roper, and to Tad Cantril for making available documents and correspondence files on the founding of the National Council on Public Polls.

The Central City Conference Report, the Proceedings of annual AAPOR meetings (printed in Public Opinion Quarterly for AAPOR's early years), and the Minutes of AAPOR Council meetings have been invaluable sources. The following publications were cited or contain additional source materials on the topics covered in this chapter.


