

NO OPINION, DON'T KNOW, AND MAYBE NO ANSWER

BY LEO BOGART

To what extent do typical candidate and issue polls give anything like "true" public opinion? How meaningful are survey data that emerge from uninformed, apathetic, and indecisive individuals who have conflicting opinions on the same issue, tailor their views to the roles they are playing, and lack any sense of responsibility for, or feeling of personal engagement in, the subject matter of the survey? Dr. Bogart, in this his presidential address to the American Association for Public Opinion Research in May 1967, makes a strong plea for greater research emphasis on how opinions come into being, evolve, and change.

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IN JULY 1945 General Leslie Groves, head of the Manhattan Project, asked Arthur Compton to do "an opinion poll among those who know what is going on."¹ The resulting survey was conducted among 150 staff members of the Chicago laboratory. They may have had private thoughts about what to do with the bomb, but they had not been involved in the discussions at higher levels. To many of them the poll was their first encounter with the problem. According to the atomic physicist Eugene Rabinowich, "We were not given more than a few minutes to answer. . . . The man distributing [the questionnaires] said, 'Put your mark in one of the places reflecting your opinion.'"

Compton's analysis of the poll's results was that "there were a few who preferred not to use the bomb at all, but 87 per cent voted for its military use, at least if after other means were tried this was found necessary to bring surrender." But within that 87 per cent there were 46 per cent who said, "Give a military demonstration in Japan to be followed by a renewed opportunity for surrender before full use of the weapons is employed," and an additional 26 per cent who said, "Give an experimental demonstration in this country with representatives of Japan present, followed by a new opportunity for surrender before full use of the weapon is employed."

The poll results were turned over to Secretary Stimson five days

¹ Len Giovanitti and Fred Freed, *The Decision to Drop the Bomb*, New York, Coward-McCann, 1965, pp. 166-167.

before the bomb burst over Hiroshima. It seems unlikely that this survey could have had much influence on Harry Truman. What is of more than passing interest is both the use of the opinion polling method in arriving at so momentous a decision, and also the vulnerability of that method to debatable and perhaps distorted interpretations of the results.

Today, opinion surveys, professional and amateur, are an integral part of the administrative structure of power, in both political and business life. The strong interest taken in polls by both Presidents Kennedy and Johnson is a matter of common knowledge,² and such interest extends down the line in government. More and more Congressmen have used polls of their own to try to overcome their ignorance of what their constituents think.³

A public official who does something that is disapproved of by a plurality of respondents in a survey risks the accusation that he has "defied" public opinion, even though the very exercise of his leadership is likely to shift opinion toward the course of action he supports. What bearing *should* the answers given on opinion surveys, amateur or professional, have on legislative or administrative action? In the domain of consumer research, it is easy enough to say that a manufacturer should give his toothpaste the flavor preferred by a majority of his customers. But the tendency to regard policy as a commodity that should obey the laws of supply and demand becomes scandalous when it is extended from the realm of marketing (where it is dubious enough) to the realm of politics. In the words of Edmund Burke, "Your representative owes you not his industry only, but his judg-

² The *New York Times* of Feb. 18, 1966, states that "the White House is keeping a sharp eye on the state of American public opinion with respect to the war, as reflected in widely published polls and private surveys taken at its instigation. . . . The White House will not disclose the identity of polltakers who do work for it."

³ This ignorance can be substantial. Warren E. Miller and Donald E. Stokes report that there is only a .19 correlation between the attitudes on foreign policy of people in a congressional constituency and the perception of these attitudes by the Congressman. Cf. "Representation in Congress," quoted by Bernard C. Cohen, *The Press and Foreign Policy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1963, p. 240.

Congressional polls, run in an amateur and often incompetent fashion, raise questions in the minds of both legislators and the public about the essential validity of opinion research. For example, the *New York Times* of Apr. 2, 1967, reports that 66 per cent of respondents in a mail survey conducted by Representative Seymour Halpern, a Queens Republican, answered "Yes" to the question: "Do you approve of the recent decision to extend bombing raids in North Vietnam aimed at oil reserves and other strategic supply depots around Hanoi and Haiphong?" At about the same time a Manhattan Democrat, Representative William Ryan, found only 14 per cent in *his* poll answering "Yes" to the direct question: "Do you believe the United States should bomb Hanoi and Haiphong?" Not only to the uninformed layman but to the congressional user of such polls, the enormous disparity in the replies (far beyond the differences one would expect between Queens and the upper west side of Manhattan) must seem to reflect discredit upon survey research.

ment; and he betrays instead of serving you if he sacrifices it to your opinion."

It has now become quite common for candidates cynically to adapt their campaign utterances to what their private polls show to be publicly acceptable. In Los Angeles, Hal Every, who runs two affiliated organizations, the Public Relations Center and the Western Opinion Research Center, advertises: "You can be elected state senator; leading public relations firm with top flight experience in statewide campaigns wants a senator candidate." Every envisions that "in the world of 1984 voters . . . will first be polled as to what type of candidate they want, even on physical and personal characteristics. The information will be fed into a computer and the candidate most closely reflecting the voters' choice will be selected to run for office. "In the presidential race," he says, "the government will sample the nation to find 1,000 typical voters and they will make the final selection."⁴

This advanced line of thought is not limited to southern California public relations men. Vladimir K. Zworykin, the renowned electronics expert, suggests that "modern technology makes it possible to give the people the ability to communicate their wishes and opinions to the government with a directness and immediacy comparable with that realized at present only in the opposite direction."⁵ He foresees a system in which every telephone would be provided with simple auxiliary equipment that would convert it into a voting station. Registered voters would express their preferences on specific questions submitted over broadcast channels in much the same manner as citizens today use voting machines to express their opinions in a referendum. According to Zworykin, "Government leaders would be able to align their policies more closely with the popular will, which would be known rather than a subject for speculation."

Zworykin echoes a widely held view that in a democracy those in authority should respond directly to public opinion. This assumes that the right questions can be asked and that everybody's responses are equally valid. It also assumes that opinions can be regarded atomistically, one by one, without regard to the context in which they come into play with each other, and without regard to the intensity with which they are held. None of these assumptions is correct.

⁴ Every's formula for success is to look for a catchy campaign slogan and to keep the candidate from making personal appearances, since the candidate who talks is a bad risk. "He makes a speech and then exposes himself to foolish questions from some nut who makes him look bad." Every points out that 80 per cent of the people do not even know the name of their Congressman; "99 per cent don't know whether an incumbent running for reelection has kept his earlier campaign promises." *New York Times*, Jan. 9, 1966.

⁵ "Communications in Government," in Nigel Calder, ed., *The World in 1984*, New York, Penguin Books, 1965, Vol. 2, pp. 51-57.

POLLING AND THE CONCEPT OF OPINION

No doubt the character and quality of public opinion have changed over the years, with the growth of literacy and mass communications. Such change has been subtle, gradual, and continuous, whereas in the academic discussion of public opinion there is a sharp discontinuity between the periods before and after the development of the systematic opinion survey. The world of public opinion in today's sense really began with the Gallup Polls of the mid-1930's, and it is impossible for us to retreat to the meaning of public opinion as it was understood by Tocqueville and Jefferson—or even by Walter Lippmann in 1922.⁶

For many years, philosophers and political scientists dealt with public opinion as though it represented a natural force, constrained perhaps by certain regularities and laws, but capricious and unpredictable like human nature itself. It was one force among many in the complex flux of politics. These forces were like currents of the air or ocean, constantly changing in their contours and directions. The public opinion survey method requires that these elusive currents be treated as though they were static, that we define and measure what was formerly undefinable and unmeasurable. Once this is done, and done over and over again, 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.

Opinion surveys are often dubious indicators of actual behavior because they do not, and perhaps cannot, measure the seething, changing character of the public temper. They generally fail to embody the rich context of motivation and cross-communication out of which opinions arise and activate people in the mass. When a working committee arrives at a consensus after a prolonged, many-sided discussion, it may do so as a matter of voting and majority rule. More commonly, when there is intense feeling on the part of some individual members of a committee, and comparative indifference on the part of others, this finds expression in the decision that is

⁶ There is no place for public opinion in the political theory of Marxism-Leninism, because the concept of "the public" implies a single body politic, whether or not it is considered to be composed of uniform and homogeneous individual components—as implied in the philosophy of one man—one vote. As long as one puts emphasis on the separate publics represented by social classes, to each of which an appropriate political ideology corresponds, the significant clash of opinion must be that of the publics themselves, of their powers and essential interests, which opinions serve only to rationalize. Opinions that deviate from those appropriate to one's class are irrational; those unrelated to class interest are irrelevant. Thus, half a century after the October Revolution, there is still in the Soviet Union only the most primitive and reluctant acceptance of the notion that survey techniques may be usefully applied to the study of serious matters.

eventually reached. The process by which a group comes to take a position is not amenable to study by a technique that approaches people one by one.

The paradox of scientific method is that we change phenomena by measuring them. An interview acts as a catalyst. The confrontation of interviewer and respondent forces the crystallization and expression of opinions where there were no more than chaotic swirls of thought. The respondent's statements themselves represent a form of behavior; they are commitments. A question asked by an interviewer changes an abstract and perhaps irrelevant matter into a genuine subject of action; the respondent confronts a voting decision, exactly as he might on a choice of candidates or on a proposition in a plebiscite. The conventional poll forces expression into predetermined channels, by presenting clear-cut and mutually exclusive choices. To accommodate one's thoughts to these channels represents for the respondent an arousal of interest, an affirmative act.

An opinion stated spontaneously in speech or writing is different in quality from one offered in answer to a structured questionnaire. The process of setting words down on paper forces a writer to eliminate the inconsistencies in his position. The public relations man who writes speeches for a corporate president learns that his boss rapidly comes to imagine that the ideas were his own. He begins to believe the words he reads simply because he has uttered them. This kind of commitment is the basis for Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance, which applies to situations in which an individual "takes a stand" and shifts his views to reduce incongruities. But a large proportion of the ideas that float through our minds do *not* represent "commitments" in which the ego is involved. They are ideas which are part of the common currency of the mass media, and with which people have a *passive* familiarity.

We think of public opinion as polarized on great issues; we think of it as intense, because polarized opinion must be intense almost by definition. Because of the identification of public opinion with the measurements of surveys, the illusion is easily conveyed of a public which is "opinionated"—which is committed to strongly held views. The publication of opinion poll results undoubtedly acts as a reinforcing agent in support of the public's consciousness of its own collective opinions as a definable, describable force. These published poll data may become reference points by which the individual formulates and expresses his opinions.

A 1964 NORC survey reported by Charles Y. Glock and Rodney Stark⁷ found that 7 per cent of U.S. adults agreed that Hitler was

⁷ *Christian Beliefs and Anti-Semitism*, New York, Harper and Row, 1966, p. 199.

right to try to kill all the Jews. We attribute no particular importance to this 7 per cent, which projects to some 8 million individuals, each one a potential mass murderer, because the sentiments they express to an interviewer are made individually without awareness of their collective strength. By contrast, we may feel enormous concern about the similarly small percentage of people who now vote for the neo-Nazi party in Germany, precisely because their opinions are crystallized and their political force is known.

The surveys on the subject of the Vietnam war illustrate the perils of interpreting answers to single questions as though they really summarized the state of public opinion.⁸ The questions commonly asked gauge public sentiment in terms of support or opposition for the administration's conduct of the war and (in the case of opposition) define it as being of the hawk or dove variety. In early 1966, when a group of researchers at Stanford explored attitudes toward the Vietnam war in much greater depth than had been done in any previously published survey, their data revealed a number of apparent contradictions. For example, a majority of the public supported the President's handling of the Vietnam situation but at the same time a majority also approved a policy of de-escalating the war effort. Press coverage of the Stanford poll, Nelson Polsby has pointed out, tended to dismiss the contradictions among people's opinions as signs of "confusion."⁹ The survey illustrates how people withdraw from the difficult issues with which they are confronted and defer to their leaders the task of making decisions. But polls are themselves news, and the "confusion" of the public is thus itself converted into a public issue.

Today, an individual's opinions on any public matter are likely to follow a *system* of opinion already expressed in the mass media.¹⁰ Such systems of opinion, in which all the ambiguities are straightened and all the loose ends are tied up, surround the great public issues of

⁸ As a typical example, under the headline "Poll Finds More Back Escalation," the *New York Times* of May 17, 1967, refers to "rising public support for escalation of the American war effort in Vietnam." Forty-five per cent of those polled said they favored "total military victory." The corresponding figure in February was 43 per cent.

⁹ "Hawks, Doves, and the Press," *Transaction*, April 1967, pp. 35-40.

¹⁰ The individual media function differently in this respect. Opinions expressed in print are apt to follow an orderly and systematic exposition of thoughts, presented sequentially and without opposition. Opinions expressed on television are apt to be expressed within a framework of discussion and debate, with all the heat generated by a direct clash of ideas. It is far more difficult to get one's ideology in a straight and consistent line from a television discussion program than from a newspaper editorial.

our time. They need not extend to the comprehensive scope of a doctrinaire ideology, but they carry with them a full panoply of arguments and rationalizations.

Opinions always start from certain factual premises. But the information we have at hand is usually limited. Our opinions invariably transcend our knowledge.¹¹ Today's mass media can produce the illusion of knowing the inside story of what in fact we know only selectively and incompletely. When governments engage in secret diplomacy, propaganda, and military actions at the same time, opinions must be based on what the public knows. If, as is often the case, a substantial percentage of the public is uninformed about and uninterested in a subject, then actions contrary to the apparent will of the polled majority may nonetheless fall within the latitude that a compliant body politic permits its leaders.¹² How sensitive should a leader be to opinion formed without knowledge of important information?

Perhaps the most important and accurate thing that surveys can tell us is the extent of public ignorance on matters of fact. Substantial sectors of the population are unable to answer correctly such questions as whether mainland China is Communist or not, who the Vietcong are, or what NATO or the Alliance for Progress is. One American in four in 1966 thought that Chiang Kai-shek was the head of the Chinese Communist Party. Such ignorance certainly does not reflect a lack of attention to the subject by the mass media. Rather, it reflects the selective inattention of large masses of the population to matters they interpret as having no direct meaning, relevance, or importance to them. The question of *what* people think about public issues is really secondary to the question of whether they think about them at all.

We measure public opinion for and against various causes, with the "undecided" as the residue. Often what we should be doing instead is measuring the degrees of apathy, indecision, or conflict on the part of the great majority, with the opinionated as the residual left over. The first question to ask is: "Have you thought about this at all? Do you *have* an opinion?"

¹¹ A *New Yorker* cartoon shows a respondent telling an interviewer, "I'm afraid I have no opinion at the moment. All my journals of opinion have been late this week."

¹² Public opinion provides a wide tolerance for obedience to leadership. The sense of deference to authority is deeply instilled in all human beings by the basic biological conditions of our infantile dependence. This is what often makes the source of information so much more important than its coherence; it can cause wide swings of agreement or disagreement with controversial statements, depending on whether they are attributed to one source or to another.

OPINION AND THE SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY

Most of what passes for public opinion research is devoted to the study of trivia; it is the study of minor preferences in the market place and in the media. To a very large extent it is not a study of opinion at all but of purchasing or consumption behavior as the respondent reports it. Of the remainder, which is really devoted to the study of public issues, much deals with subjects of transitory interest that are unfamiliar to most people or incapable of arousing strong feelings pro or con.

What an individual defines as important cannot be separated from what he feels he has within his control.¹⁸ Compared to the questions of consumer choice with which we most commonly confront our survey respondents, political questions may have more objective importance. Yet the average individual has no control over political questions, or over the problems that they represent, except within the framework of collective social action. The questions asked in opinion surveys often seem irrelevant to a world of barricades, guerilla warriors, and lumbering armies.

When an interviewer confronts me with questions about my brand choice in beer or automobiles, he is dealing with preferences that relate to past and possible future actions over which I exercise the primary control regardless of what influences may be brought to bear upon me. When the same interviewer asks my opinions about China, Rhodesia, or the Latin-American Common Market, he is asking about matters on which my opinions can be translated into action only through the legitimized institutions of society or through noninstitutional social behavior, from a be-in to a riot.

Seen in this light, pre-election polls are closer to consumer studies than are most other kinds of opinion surveys. In market research we may ask about brand preference, but we usually also go on to find out from the record of past purchases whether or not the respondent is a likely prospect for the product. By the same token, since 1948 we have accepted the idea that it is not enough in political polls to

¹⁸ Paul Goodman says pessimistically, "People believe that the great background conditions of modern life are beyond our power to influence. . . . History is out of control, it is no longer something that we make but something that happens to us." *New York Review of Books*, Nov. 3, 1966.

A similar view is voiced by Tom Wicker, who refers to the "growing sense of dismay and despair at the inability of the individual to make an impact on public policy through the accepted channels of dissent." Wicker refers to "the malaise beyond dissent—the fear that dissent does not matter any more; that only action counts; but that no one really knows what action to take. More and more 20th-century man crouches like an old woman on her stoop, pointing her rusty shotgun at the oncoming expressway, knowing all the time that in the end the bulldozers will go through." *New York Times*, Mar. 12, 1967.

determine what candidate people favor; we also need their past voting record to assess the likelihood that they will act on their preferences on Election Day. Voting intentions, like brand preferences, may change, but votes, like purchases, are irrevocable. Both voting intentions and brand preferences reflect a different order of phenomenon from the kinds of opinion which are not expected to eventuate in action, which are understood to be in the hands of more powerful outside forces.

When does a statement of opinion on a public matter reflect the kind of personal engagement that characterizes our statements about acts that are within our power to control? In our impersonal, industrial, urban society no one wants to get involved in the problems of strangers. On an inside page of the newspaper, a 2-inch UPI dispatch of May 3, 1967, from Miami reports that "a wounded driver of a bakery truck bled to death tonight while 20 witnesses to the shooting stood by without notifying the authorities." Such an incident seems commonplace, barely meriting attention; from it a direct line can be traced to the world's complacent acceptance of starvation and mass murder.

Bruno Bettelheim observes that concentration camp inmates living just a few hundred yards away from the gas chambers and crematoria denied knowledge of them.

The separation of behavior patterns and values inside and outside of camp was so radical, and the feelings about it so strong that most prisoners avoided talking about it; it was one of many subjects that were "taboo." . . . This attitude of denying "reality" to events so extreme as to threaten the prisoner's integration was a first step toward developing new mechanisms for surviving in the camp. By denying reality to overwhelming situations, they were somehow made bearable; but at the same time it constituted a major change in experiencing the world.¹⁴

Chaim Aron Kaplan's remarkable journal of the Warsaw ghetto has the following entry for June 7, 1942: "When the news doesn't tell us what we want to hear, we twist and turn it until it seems full of hints, clues and secrets that support our views . . . and the news from Reuters always contains a certain intonation or expression to satisfy and comfort a spirit thirsting for a speedy and quick redemption."¹⁵

If, under such conditions, people can deny the imminence of their own doom, how much easier it is to deny reality to the unpleasant events which we know about only at second or third hand, which happen to faceless statistics rather than to individual human beings with whom we can empathize! Why should we have opinions about such

¹⁴ *The Informed Heart*, Glencoe, Ill., Free Press, 1963.

¹⁵ *Commentary*, November 1965, pp. 52-53.

matters? If we "think about the unthinkable," must this not become an obsession that makes all normal activity impossible?

Opinions become real when those who hold them feel a responsibility for action. John Darley and Bibb Latané¹⁶ found that experimental subjects responded more slowly to an "emergency" affecting another individual when a third person was present as a bystander. When there were four other bystanders present, nearly half the experimental subjects did not report the emergency at all; the reaction time of those who did respond was exactly half as fast as when there was no other bystander and the subject had to take on all the responsibility. In the latter case, the subject had to perceive the situation as one in which he alone could summon help.

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE OPINIONS AND THE FUNCTION OF ROLES

In our bureaucratized world it is easier than ever before in history for individuals to abjure responsibility not only for their acts but also for the consequences of the opinions they hold. Eichmann, as we know, "only followed orders." It now seems to be quite well established that one can ascribe to one's superiors the motivation and blame for one's own socially unacceptable acts. It is no less common for those superiors to pass the blame to their subordinates or (again) to "The System."

In *War and Peace*, Tolstoy describes Napoleon on the battlefield at Borodino as a hostage to history, powerless to control the destinies of the armies he had set in motion:

Even before he gave that order the thing he did not desire, and for which he gave the order only because he thought it was expected of him, was being done. And he fell back into that artificial realm of imaginary greatness, and again—as a horse walking a treadmill thinks it is doing something for itself—he submissively fulfilled the cruel, sad, gloomy and inhuman role predestined for him. . . .¹⁷

Even Heinrich Himmler, at war's end, when he harbored the fantasy that he would be accepted by the West as the leader of postwar Germany, made no effort to argue in favor of the policy of exterminating Jews; he simply denied that it was taking place. Receiving a representative of the World Jewish Congress, Himmler complained of "distorted" reports about the concentration camps: "The bad connotation of these camps is due to their inappropriate name. They

¹⁶ "Bystander Intervention in Emergency Situations I: Diffusion of Responsibility" (as yet unpublished). Paper delivered to the American Psychological Association, Sept. 6, 1966.

¹⁷ Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, translated from the Russian by Constance Garnett, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1963, p. 909.

should have been called 'reformatories'. . . . The treatment in the camps was hard but just." Himmler conceded that crimes occasionally happened in the camps but added, "I also punish the persons responsible."¹⁸ Was this "acting"? Or was Himmler, *while* he lied, expressing genuine opinions that he had held all along *at the same time* he was engineering the "final solution"?

This is an outrageously extreme case, of course, but the psychological mechanism is a commonplace among politicians. Who is the real Kurt Kiesinger—the highly placed Nazi propagandist of the forties or America's staunch ally of the sixties? Who is the real Lester Maddox—the racist wielding axe handles to bar Negroes from his restaurant, or the great statesman who as Governor of Georgia has his picture taken shaking hands with (the militant Negro leader) Julian Bond?

In the biographies and memoirs of important political figures it is not unusual to read that in private they expressed opinions in contradiction to the views they expressed publicly. We may be shocked when Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., tells us that John Kennedy was disdainful of Dean Rusk.¹⁹ If such an attitude truly represented Kennedy's opinion, expressed to Schlesinger within the framework of friendship and close collaboration, does it acquire greater meaning or validity than the esteem the President professed in public and confirmed by maintaining Mr. Rusk in his very high position? Can we assume that the public statements of public men reflect less of their personal convictions than their private statements do? The man who is in the public eye necessarily speaks in accordance with a role, but it is a role that he has chosen, and one that carries with it the responsibility of withholding his doubts and indecisions from view.²⁰

The rest of us are no more immune to ambivalence and self-contradiction merely because our thoughts go unrecorded. Our increasingly segmented lives demand that we play a diversity of roles, each with its appropriate set of attitudes. Honesty may have little relevance to the task of weeding rationalizations and role-play from "true" opinions. Men believe their own lies when they repeat them often

¹⁸ John Toland, *The Last 100 Days*, New York, Random House, 1966, p. 415.

¹⁹ *A Thousand Days*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1965.

²⁰ Self-consciousness of role has always linked politics and the stage. The entry of movie stars into public life is not unique to the United States. In India, N. G. Ramachandran, the "Tamil Errol Flynn," was shot in the neck and critically wounded by another film star, M. R. Radha, who has generally played villain roles. Both men were prominent in political life and Ramachandran was at last reports sure of election in spite of the fact that he had to campaign from a hospital bed and was unable to talk. At the same time, according to the *New York Times* of Feb. 7, 1967, his latest movie is "a stupendous success. What makes it irresistible is the casting of the real-life assailant in the villain's role." Cf. also Orrin E. Klapp, *Symbolic Leaders*, Chicago, Aldine, 1964.

enough. Yesterday's rationalization becomes today's conviction. What opinion analyst can tell when a lie becomes a truth?

An American who at home is highly critical of U.S. foreign policy may defend that policy when he travels abroad. We all express judgments, prejudices, and emotions in the bosom of our family that would be outrageous if we heard them on the lips of strangers. Are these any less our opinions than the more reflective statements we make when we are on our best behavior?

After the military take-over of the Greek government, in the spring of 1967, a reporter interviewed an old man in a small Greek village. He asked (a typical unbiased reporter's question): "Are people unhappy with the new regime?" "They like it," he said firmly. Then with a smile, "They have to like it." And finally with a shrug, "Most don't like it."²¹

I am not proposing that on any given subject an individual has one public opinion and one private opinion which may or may not be the same. I am rather suggesting that one may at the same time hold a *variety* of opinions, articulated or vague, public shading into private. These multiple opinions, which correspond to different roles or reference groups, may be contradictory or incongruent. They may be actively at war with each other and arouse in us an uncomfortable sense of conflict, or they may be no more than low-charge reflections of the opposing viewpoints to which we are subjected through mass media and in conversation. Just as the same object may arouse alternating emotions of love and hate, depending on circumstances, so we are capable of simultaneously incorporating a belief and its opposite or seeing the best and worst in two alternative courses of action.

To "change one's mind" may mean painfully reworking an entire system of belief. More often, it means starting with an emotional judgment from which a ready-made structure of rationalizations follows automatically. In a recent experiment, John Wallace found that rewarding a subject by complimenting him on his success in playing a role produced substantial attitude change in the direction of the debating position he had taken (contrary to his private opinion).²²

²¹ *New York Times*, May 14, 1967.

²² John Wallace, "Role Reward and Dissonance Reduction," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 1966, pp. 305-312. Wallace followed the lead of Irving L. Janis and B. T. King, who found some years ago that experimental subjects who were placed in a "forced compliance" situation in which they had to argue a point of view opposite to their own tended to change their attitudes in the direction that they expressed. The subject was "impressed by his own cogent arguments, clarifying illustrations, and convincing appeals which he is stimulated to think of in order to do a good job of 'selling' the idea to others." Cf. Irving L. Janis and B. T. King, "The Influence of Role Playing on Opinion Change," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, Vol. 49, 1954, p. 218.

As one subject put it, "I tend to think of myself as an honest and sincere person. When you told me that the others considered me 'a very good actor,' I was somewhat baffled . . . actually, a little offended. The more I thought about it, the more I became convinced that what I had said in the debate was what I truly believed." By contrast, when experimental subjects were praised for the *content* of what they said, they did not move nearly as strongly in the expected direction. The reason for this, Wallace suggests, was that the subjects knew they were just repeating "hack" arguments that were in the "public domain." "Hence, the subject could verbalize such ideas, receive reward for the reasonableness, logical nature of, and persuasiveness of such arguments but experience little dissonance over and above that expected from simple voluntary compliance." Wallace hypothesizes that "success in role playing increases the subject's involvement in the role. And the greater the involvement of the subject, the more one would expect him to strive for self-consistency."

On the day in 1939 when Franco's Fascist armies marched into Madrid, the streets were alive with cheering crowds. When these same streets had been full of crowds applauding the troops of the Republic, were these different people altogether or were some of them the same? And did either ovation echo the mass sentiments of the moment? Throughout this century we have lived with this phenomenon over and over again.

At the end of World War II, I participated in the project of recruiting high officers of the Luftwaffe to assist the American Air Force in the continuing war against Japan. When these gentlemen were asked if they would turn against their former allies, there was not the slightest glimmer of hesitation, doubt, or ambiguity in their response. Nor, indeed, was there any that I know of in the case of the Italians, Rumanians, and other military forces whose rulers switched sides in the course of the war.

Does this kind of sharp reversal of sides reflect a change of opinion? Does not the phenomenon of sudden political change rather reflect the coexistence of antagonistic systems of thought, alignment, loyalty, and opinion in the minds of the same people? These coexisting systems can reverse their dominance when this seems to be called for by the objective realities of the situation or by immediate short-run personal self-interest.

For the highly political man who recognizes the inconsistencies, weaknesses, gaps, and fallacies in his own intellectual value system, there already exists in embryo the contradictory argument, the antithesis to his thesis. It was not necessary for Bukharin, Radek, and the other defendants in the great Moscow trials to be coached on the

details of their imaginary crimes any more than it was necessary for Galileo to receive indoctrination in Ptolemaic astronomy in order to present a "disproof" of what he had demonstrated.

An act of political or religious conversion represents a reorganization of one's perceptions, ideas, past experiences, and beliefs. Such an act may perhaps be akin to the achievement of insight in psychotherapy, when forgotten, suppressed, or previously ignored relationships suddenly assume coherence and emotional significance. The secret of such insight is very often the recognition of ambivalence of feeling. The patient recognizes the strain of hatred for his objects of love and his love for the objects of his hatred. We know better than to call such events "changes of opinion," for they are indeed much more than that; they are deep changes of the heart, and they are beyond the cunning of statistics.

CONCLUDING NOTE

Today presidents—of the United States and of TV networks—gauge the success of their policies by their ratings. Surveys are taken as literal descriptions of public opinion. This easily leads to the proposition that a democracy should be ruled by the public will as described by the polls. But, too often, the polling method gets people to answer questions on matters they have not thought about and for which they feel no sense of responsibility. We are apt to answer questions differently when we know the decision is really up to us, but it is harder and harder to have this feeling when we are told who is going to win an election before we have decided whom to vote for, or who has won before we have voted. "Don't know" in response to a survey question often means "Don't want to know," which is another way of saying, "I don't want to get involved."

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.

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," and to establish that our primary task is to understand how opinions come to be held at all, and how they evolve and change.

E. M. Forster has drawn the distinction between "flat" and "round"

fictional characterizations.²³ Most opinion studies, like most works of fiction, employ flat, abbreviated treatments of their subjects. We reject the reality of comic-book characters who are predictably heroes or villains, yet we too often settle for comic-book statistics on infinitely complex matters of opinion. It is the rare poll that allows us to see opinion as multi-faceted, multi-layered, and intricate.

²³ E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1947.