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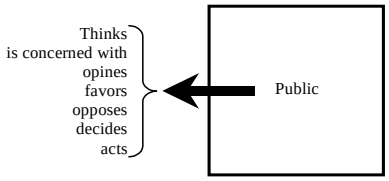
The Social Construction of Public Opinion

Klaus Krippendorff

1 The common view

What makes public opinion so powerful?



Etymologically, 'opinion' has at least one foot in the idea of being able to think independently, of owning one's thoughts, and the other in the idea of choice, of being able to have preferences, judge something one way or another, or take one of several positions on a controversial issue. Having opinions implies being cognitively autonomous, independent, but also somewhat unpredictable.

Although the word 'public' comes to us from Latin: as a noun it meant 'people,' and as an adjective, it meant 'accessible to all,' not restricted to private use. Two independent historians of the French revolution, Keither Baker (1990) and Mona Ozouf (1988) have suggested that the noun phrase 'l'opinion publique' was invented and gained currency during the 18th century. They identified the word 'public opinion' as a purely linguistic concept, void of a fixed or definite referent. As a rhetorical device, 'public opinion' functioned similar to "public tribunals," invoking the latter's political legitimacy.

Today, newspapers tell us that public opinion *favors* one candidate over another, *decides* an election, is *concerned* about an issue, *is against* a proposed legislation, *likes* to hear certain things, *expresses* its convictions and *acts* accordingly. We read that public opinion *can kill* the reputation of a person, *convict* an accused, and that political leaders cannot rule against it or eventually fail. In the news, public opinion appears to be an amazingly powerful political actor.

Not surprisingly, governments, businesses, and political scientists take public opinion seriously. Getting public opinion on one's side has its costs. Candidates for political office see the need to find out what the public *wants* and pay handsomely for that information in order to mount effective election campaigns. When trailing behind the frontrunner, a candidate might well proclaim not to

care about what pollsters say while secretly commissioning another survey to find more favorable opinions to report. Public opinion polls and their twins, public relation efforts and market research, are well-financed social techniques. Even social researchers are not immune to the power of public opinion. When applying for grants, they invoke it by arguing for the social significance of their proposed research. Public opinion is real, because, among many reasons, those who feel their effect pay for knowing what it is.

Surely, public opinion is not a fact of nature that could be found somewhere unattended, nor is it a tangible artifact that could be manufactured and photographed. Declaring it not to exist (cf. Bourdieu 1979) or as a phantom of the imagination, would not facilitate understanding the phenomenon, just as when dismissing it as being subjective, irrational, imaginary, or a myth. It evidently is a social phenomenon, a social construction (cf. Herbst 1993), much like money, families, governments, wars, and Nobel prizes are. It has a reality that is constituted in what people do. It does not exist independent of human actions. But what makes it so powerful?

It is the common use of language and its associated perception that makes public opinion into an undisputed fact. Saying that the public *is concerned* about something, *favors* something, *is against* something, *decides* something, *likes to hear* about something, *supports* something, *has attitudes* about something, *expresses* its beliefs, and *acts* on them personifies the public. Personification (cf. Lakoff/Johnson 1980: 33f.) is the most pervasive metaphorical root of the social construction of public opinion. Personification makes actors out of objects, here out of an abstraction.

To be clear: The public, the way we experience it, cannot literally speak, has no brain to think, no motor organs to act, and no purposes to pursue. Yet, everyday use of language attributes virtually all of these human mental abilities to the public: thinking, making up its mind, judging, and enacting its beliefs. It is the metaphor of personalization that makes the public into the powerful, volatile, and irrational ruler that people fear and need to be concerned with. Personification grants the public an independent mind whose capricious and often unreasonable nature can be dangerous for those who mess with it. Metaphors occur in language but achieve significance through their behavioural entailments. Exercising power over individuals' reputation, affecting businesses, and governments is an entailment of the metaphorical use of the word 'public,' nothing more than that. Baker (ibid.) and Ozouf (ibid.) were right in suggesting that the 18th century 'public opinion' was a linguistic invention, but they did not quite recognize the metaphorical source of its reality and see its perceptual entailments.

Sociologists and theorists of the public, see the public of public opinion rather differently. First of all, "public" contrasts with "private." Public is what is

seen and done under the watchful eye of others, private is what is nobody else's business except for the closest members of one's family or trusted acquaintances. The public sphere is where everyone can go and mingle; the private sphere is limited to the privacy of one's home. The French sociologist Gabriel Tarde saw the public as a conversation that takes place in the coffee houses of Paris and the salons of London.

> "The political function of conversation, according to Tarde, is to percolate opinion – that is, to refine individual opinion so that it becomes more 'considered' and, in ways unspecified, to generate one or two national opinions on a particular subject" (cf. Katz 1998: 89).

Here, public opinions are far from being mental constructions. They are asserted by individuals, collectively contemplated, and weeded out in conversations among citizens. Jürgen Habermas builds on Tarde's notion by defining

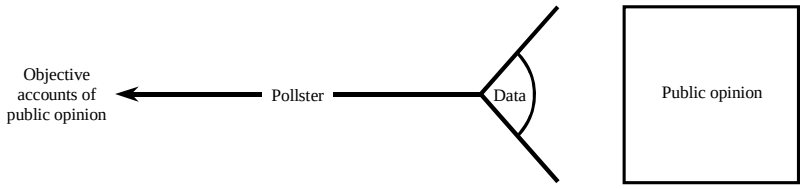
> "'public sphere' […] (as) a domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed. Access to the public sphere is open to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere is constituted in every conversation in which private persons come together to form a public. When a public is large, this kind of communication requires certain means of dissemination and influence; today newspapers and periodicals, radio and television are the media of the public sphere" (cf. Habermas 1991: 398).

Habermas' conceives of public opinion as resulting from rational deliberations, not limited by power relationships that would constrain free expression. – How different their notions are from metaphorical talk in everyday life!

Although Tarde and Habermas are the most outstanding theorists of public opinion and will serve as reference here, consensus among public opinion researchers on their object of inquiry turns out to be rare. As early as in 1965, Harwood Childs surveyed the literature and identified 50 distinct definitions of public opinion (cf. Childs 1965). Some researchers refuse to define it, arguing, as Hermann Oncken did in 1914, "everybody knows exactly what public opinion means" (cf. Oncken cited in Noelle-Neumann 1993: 59). Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (ibid.) suggests that the uncertainty about what public opinion is persist to this day. However, what "everyone knows" and takes for granted is not much different from the common view of an indisputably powerful ruler who can determine individuals' reputation, judge the conduct of governments, and settle whatever else matters to people. The power of public opinion derives from the personifying the abstraction called 'public' and it is its use in language that makes it so.

2 Public opinion as measured

Is there something to be measured?



Pollsters claim their task to be one of measuring public opinion, "taking the pulse of the public." The everyday use of the word 'measurement' assumes that (1) there is a reliable, i.e., replicable, measuring instrument, (2) there is something to be measured, and (3) the resulting measure accurately represents a quality of the measured object. Measurement conceptions also underlie social scientific efforts to quantify social phenomena, rendering unambiguous and numerically calculable what would remain intractable otherwise. Moreover, and consistent with (2), is the assumption that repeated measurements will not change the measured object. Indeed, texts on public opinion research describe public opinion as existing independent of how and how many pollsters measure it. With such measurement conceptions in mind, the methodological issues of public opinion research then become reliability and validity – reliability in the sense that two polls taken of the same issues and at the same time agree with each other; and validity in the sense that polling results are independently verified, hence true. When polls that should have produced the same findings deviate from one another, the struggle begins about which one was on target and which was not and why. The use of these criteria in ensuing debates demonstrates measurement conceptions at work.

Public opinion researchers, like all empirical researchers, could proceed by delineating their object of study, asking themselves where it occurs, going to the site of its manifestation, and inquiring into the processes that bring it about. But this is not what pollsters do. If they were, they might discover that there is much talk in public places about civic issues, politics, and neighbourhood problems, but no public opinion without a measuring effort. Thomas Osborne and Nikolas Rose (1999) use the example of public opinion research to affirmatively answer their more question "do the social sciences create phenomena?" The idea of measurements actively creating social phenomena is incommensurate with the idea of passively attaching numbers to the dimensions of measured phenomena.

If researchers were interested in a collective behaviour that changes or directs the dynamics of society – avoiding the mentalist construction of 'opinion' – they might be lead to other public "repertoires" (Tilly 1983) like riots, petitions, demonstrations, town hall meetings, refusals to paying taxes, lobbies, pressure groups, money flows to political parties, popular media content, and so on. But by calling their object of research 'public opinion,' pollsters confine themselves to find out what people say they think, believe, know, or judge. Privileging what people say over what people do is hard to justify, except, perhaps, in terms of methodological conveniences.

Public opinion researchers could also reflect on how their use of the word 'public opinion' directs their attention to generalizing the opinions of people, how the personification of the public leads them to attribute mental capabilities to what they are observing, in other words, how their use of language traps them into constructing what they believe they are facing and studying it as a powerful phenomenon. They would then have to realize and abandon the illusion of measuring public opinion as existing independent of their talking about it, and inquire into the language that creates their interest in the phenomenon in question. Pollsters do not do this either. They tend to consider language as a means of obtaining answers to relevant questions from interviewees, not as the source of languaging their own reality into being.

Instead, pollsters are committed to apply their well-established, easily explainable, and hence widely popular measuring instruments, and blindly accept their results – notwithstanding that their object is constructed in language and has none of mental abilities that the metaphor entails.

Measurement theory is a subspecies of the theory of representation and assumes, as already noted in (2) above, the independent and prior existence of an object to be measured. According to (3), the task of measurement is to represent selected qualities of this object in quantitative terms. To be acceptable by fellow researchers, the resulting quantities need to be stated as objective facts (not biased or deviating from the truth), specific propositions (displaying a desired level of accuracy), of relatively invariant facts (not changing as the result of measurement), and relevant to the theory or actions under consideration.

The language of measurement theory permeates how pollsters describe much of their efforts. Pollsters have no qualms claiming that they have *found* the public *to have* a particular opinion, that the public *is* of a certain mind, and *has spoken*, *judged*, or *decided* an issue, and present quantitative measures in support of their claims. When polling results turn out to be unreliable, for example, after election predictions failed, people tend to look for two kinds of faults, without questioning the theory of measurement. Pollsters may be accused for the imperfect or incompetent use of the theoretically perfect measuring instruments, and

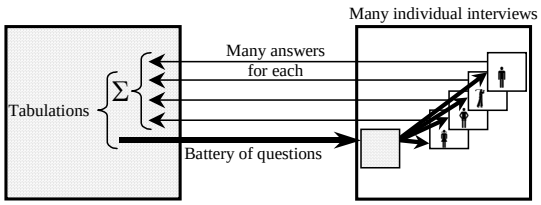
pollsters, in turn, may excuse themselves by blaming the public for changing their minds, for not sticking to the opinions they had just asserted. The first can be seen when pollsters are accused of political biases, questioned regarding their source of funding, the use of inadequate sample sizes, asking marginally relevant questions, or misrepresenting their numbers. Personal biases, statistical inadequacies, and irrelevance are terms that pertain to inappropriate uses of measurement. Blaming the subjects is manifest in conceptions of floating, uninformed, or unstable voters, and volatile masses – all of with have a slightly negative connotation and point to properties of public opinion that do not quite fit what the theory of measurement requires. However, the theory and methodology of measurement and the conception of public opinion adopted by public opinion researchers is rarely if ever questioned.

A recent book (Bishop, 2005) questions the reality of public opinion by explaining the often tremendous variations of polling results by the way interview questions are formulated. The inclusion of questions that allow answers like "do not know," "not sure," and "no opinion," for example, can generate fictional distributions. But his well-researched criticism and conclusion that American public opinion polls create the illusion of public opinion stays entirely within the paradigm of measurement theory.

Although it would be hard to justify measuring something without knowing what it is that is being measured – which leads Bishop (ibid.) to consider public opinion an illusion – pollsters seem to have no qualms in publishing the results of their measuring efforts as objective "findings" and appeal to scientific methods to assure their acceptance. One way out of this obvious but rarely acknowledged epistemological dilemma is to consider public opinion defined operationally. Operational definitions define phenomena in terms of how a known measuring device responds. For physicists, time is what a standard clock measures; and distance the number of an agreed units on a yardstick between two points. The criterion for operational definitions is not truth but replicability (and perhaps utility). I contend that pollsters unwittingly construct the phenomenon of public opinion by means of the data generating devices they happen to apply. Slightly generalizing this insight, public opinion is the artifact of how public opinion researchers conduct themselves in public, which includes the questions they ask of their interviewees, what they do with them, and how they publish their findings, as will be discussed in the following. Operational definitions are not unusual, nor objectionable, except for the pollsters' epistemologically naïve and methodologically unsustainable claims that their research results represent public opinion the way it is. But how do the data that pollsters generate come about? What is the social reality that polling operationalizes?

3 What pollsters actually do

What happens when pollsters meet public opinion? Do they?
And if they don't, what is the empirical ground of its construction?



Pollsters' claims regarding public opinion are mostly based on data. But what do public opinion researchers do to establish the ground for their claims?

To start with the basics, the point of contact between researchers and their object of research consists of asking the interviewees in a sample of individuals a battery of identical questions and recording their answers. Asking questions is natural and human, but in the hand of pollsters, the ensuing interpersonal exchanges are very strange indeed, almost designed to prevent the public nature of public opinion from being recognizable in the pollsters' data.

In public settings, people speak in view of being held accountable by others for what they say or do – by others who might applaud or not be satisfied with what they are hearing, contribute their own beliefs to the conversation, or are determined to convince others of their own views. In such processes the crucial difference between public and individual opinions becomes apparent. Public opinions do not reside in any one's head but in the interactions among people who have expectations of how the opinions held by others relate to their own. Consider three observations of how polling data relate to processes in which public opinions arise.

First, pollsters interview individuals separate from each other. This practice is required for individual responses to be countable. Frequencies are not meaningful unless the units of enumeration are freely permutable and independent of each other. This purely mathematical requirement for counting individuals responses leads to the injunction against interviewing individuals jointly, as contributors to conversations, and as participants in *networks* within which opinions are sorted out, negotiated, and consented to or dismissed.

Pierre Bourdieu (1979) argues that there are political and moral questions. Political questions implicate how other members of the public would respond to them and answering them requires taking a political position. In his terms, political opinions are 'mobilized' through group interactions, which escape the aggre-

gation of individual expressions. Political opinions are not reducible to moral judgements (although I would say that moral judgements can hardly be separated from their political consequences). Nevertheless, Bourdieu supports the point being made here.

There is also another omission. If public opinion is a *process* of deliberation among people who have at least something in common with each other – from common political interests to finding themselves in the same neighbourhood bar – interviewing what pollsters call a '*cross section*' of the population suspends that process altogether. By a cross section, pollsters mean a representative sample of individuals from a population, which is constructed according to a theory and presumed to exist at a temporal moment, cut off from its continuous timeline, a '*snap shot*' of that population. Cross sections not only disrupt the ongoing conversations in which individual opinions can become public opinions, they also bring individuals into a study that have – in a truly representative sample ideally nothing in common except for their membership in the population and would most unlikely communicate with each other in reality. This methodological practice filters the process out of public opinion as well.

Discounting the interpersonal and temporal nature of public opinion in favor of individual attributes could have ideological or cultural explanations. It is not surprising that this practice goes well with the Western ideal of human beings as rational and autonomous individuals and the consequent relegation of social phenomena as subordinate to individual cognition. It also gels with the Western democratic ideal of one citizen one vote (Champagne (2004). Finally, it has economic implications: interviewing individuals is cheaper than studying prolonged deliberations among citizens in bars, public parks, and town hall meetings. All of these possible motivations have nothing to do with what happens where public opinions are formed.

Symbolic interactionist Herbert Blumer (1948) observed the same flaw but in slightly different terms. Arguing that society is not merely the sum of disparate individuals but of organic relationships among individuals, he invited pollsters to incorporate these sociological concepts into public opinion research. It would imply, he suggested, that public opinion researchers investigate various functional groups instead of simply aggregating individual responses. Blumer's image of society was central to the Chicago School of sociology. His call for pollsters to join the explanatory paths of the social sciences, the way he saw them, was not heeded.

Second, to gain analyzable responses, public opinion researchers restrict their data as follows:

- The opinions studied are preconceived by the public opinion researcher and limited to those that are relevant to the researcher's objectives. The inter-

viewees are not allowed to participate in conceptualizing what matters to them.

- To elicit easily analyzable responses, answers to interview questions are formulated in advance of the interviewing process as well. Interviews by pollsters tend to be what is called structured. This forces interviewees to speak within the predefined limits of pollsters' expectations. Creative answers to interviewer questions are ruled out.
- Communication between standardized (trained) interviewers and (naïve or natural) interviewees amounts to making choices among a fixed number of question-answer pairs, one answer per question, serially provided by the interviewer. Such choices have not the faintest resemblances to ordinary conversations among ordinary citizens.
- For fear of biasing the responses, no provisions are made for interviewees to ask about what these questions mean, to inquire about why they are being asked, or to negotiate with the interviewee about the best way to express individual concerns. Interviewees are prevented from saying what is on their mind and unless it fits the pollster's question-answer pairs, it is considered "not applicable" or "no response."

In other words, interviewees are merely used to confirm the categories of the researchers' preconceived opinions. While the designers of interview question undoubtedly are concerned that their wording is understood and the answers provided are meaningful, the interview situation created under these conditions provides no clue to how questions are conceived, no way to confirm what the answers mean to those who give them, no way to check whether the choices among alternative responses are relevant in the public life of interviewees, including whether interviewees had ever contemplated or discussed the issues in question with fellow citizen, that is, whether they are public as opposed to privately held opinions. What the polling data mean to the interviewees remains entirely uncertain.

To assure that interviewees understand the polling questions alike, it would not be impossible to measure the reliability of the polling data, as is customary in content analysis. This, however, is uncommon. The few studies known to have asked the same questions repeatedly were designed to test interviewer biases and the like, not to ascertain whether the concerns of the researchers have anything to do with the concerns of the interviewees.

Third, not only are the so-called public opinion data restricted to opinions that are preconceived by pollsters, perhaps most important is the fact that interviews are conducted in a severely constrained communication situation, a situation that bears little resemblance to what happens where public opinions arise. When individuals are recruited to be interviewed, they still are free agents, able

to refuse participation, inquire into compensation for their time, ask what is expected of them, and request to know what the data would be used for. At this point, communication still is relatively open. Interviewers and potential interviewees are partners in conversation.

Accepting to be interviewed means entering into a semi-contractual relationship with the interviewer, promising to play the role of an interviewee and subjecting him or herself to the interviewer's systematic probing. In such asymmetrical communication relationship, interviewees are asked to defer questioning what happens to them, committing themselves to respond truthfully, not politically, and to answer all and only the interviewer's questions, not their own. To reinforce compliance with this inequality, interviewers present themselves as representatives of a polling organization and are trained to play the role of standard interviewers: impersonal, interchangeable, neutral, and following a protocol.

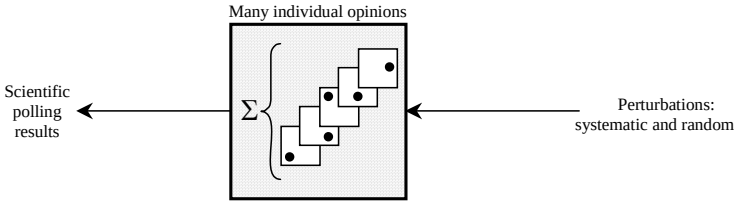
The literature is full of examples of how power inequalities of this kind affect communication: People tend to please their interviewers, try to figure out what the "correct" answer should be, answer questions even when they have no clue about what is involved, try to be politically correct, and avoid giving embarrassing answers. Interviewers are also discouraged from explaining what their questions and answers mean for fear that such explanations could influence interviewees' choices, which it they surely would, why else would anyone ask? Whatever transpires in such contrived interviewing situations, the data generated therein, are less about what people would say or do in public than about how they respond to such severely constrained communication situations. Thus polling data reflect the consensual power of interviewers over interviewees.

In sum, by interviewing individuals separately, the intersubjectivity within which the public is manifest is eliminated from so-called public opinion data. By bringing only predetermined question-answer pairs to the interviewees attention, polling data merely confirm the pollsters' concepts of relevant public issues, not the interviewees'. And by getting, often paying, people to conform to the communicationally confining interviewee role, the interviewer exercises unchallengeable institutional control over what can transpire during an interview, and what counts as data reflects the power relationship at work at the point of contact between pollsters and members of the public.

Polling literally creates a social situation whose effects it records. Pollsters seem blind, not realizing that the power relationships that operate during interviews become inscribed in the data being generated: complying with instructions, being paid for participation, communicating with detached or anonymous interviewers, and prevented from talking about what really matters to them.

4 Theories of public opinion reflecting analytical procedures

Are theories of public opinion theories about what analysts do with their data?



The situation described above generates a typically large number of answers to a battery of questions for statistical analysis. Because interviewers are trained to be opinionless, unvarying, and standardized, it is common to discard evidence of interviewer involvement by removing references to them from these data.

What remains is a collection of question-answer pairs that is categorized by how interviewees responded. Testing scientific hypotheses on such data amounts to aggregating what falls into these categories: absolute frequencies, percentages, and distributional characteristics in various cross tabulations. Analysts consider themselves free to organize such data sets in any conceptually convenient manner, which assumes, according to measurement theory, that data points are freely permutable and represent demonstrably independent phenomena. The foregoing analysis suggested that the intersubjective nature of public opinion does not meet this condition. Thus, ignoring the public nature of public opinion occurs not only when generating interview data, but also in the process of analysing them.

Recall also that polling data are generated in contrived communication situations that bear little resemblance to what happens in public. In measurement theory, this bias is called a systematic as opposed to a random measuring error. Random errors cause a frequency distribution to spread; systematic errors cause the data to deviate from a true mean. Because analysts of polling data cannot know the truth about public opinion outside of their data, systematic errors cannot be recognized in polling data – unless it comes to the fore by other means, in the form of public actions, for example, monies raised for a cause, changes in the stock market, consumption, voting, demonstrations, or riots. Random errors are more easily analysed but are not the primary target of opinion research. But systematic errors enter uncertainties into the findings that one cannot measure, hence the importance of a critical analysis of the kind here provided. This leads to the conclusion that the usual pollsters' claim that their public opinion polls represent the opinion of a public amount to a leap of faith.

Aggregation is always guided by the belief that a multiplicity of phenomena joins in a larger effect or concept of interest, here, in the public as constituted by what its members say in conversation. It would stand to reason that the manner in which data are aggregated should model or at least acknowledge how the multiplicity of interviewees join in that larger effect. Aggregating *intra*-individual interview data is justifiable by psychological theories, for example, of how several seemingly separate attitudes are the result of prejudices or ideologies, which can be tested by clustering the question-answer pairs of individuals in the sample. By contrast, in aggregating data on the *inter*-individual phenomena of public opinion, one would expect researchers to draw on social or political models of how public opinion arises in the interaction among individual citizens. This is not the case, however.

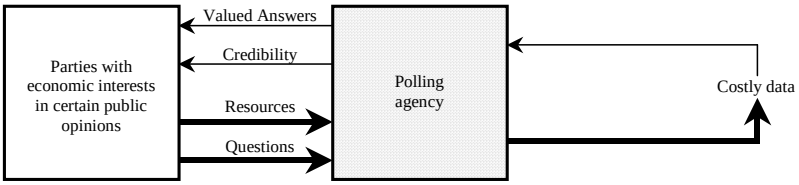
By considering their enumeration, cross tabulation, and computation of more abstract statistical indices on interview data justified, public opinion researchers in effect adopt a notion of the public as a frequency distribution of individual responses. This mechanistic, apolitical, and non-communicational model of public is an artefact of the analytical tools in use, not explainable from the data.

To qualify there are conditions under which the mathematical or statistical operations that generate polling results may well represent situations in which public processes absent, and the larger effect or concept are indeed manifest in frequency distributions of individual opinions and actions. Two examples may suffice. The obvious one is political elections, which are decided by counting individual votes, one citizen one vote, just as when aggregating individual opinions statistically. We know of the notoriously unreliable election forecasts during the deliberative phase of an election campaign. Forecasts become better when data are obtained closer to an election date, as more voters have made up their mind and are no longer open to the influence from others. Exit polls are most successful precisely because for voters who leave the voting booths, deliberation has ended. But predictions based on exit polls merely beat the election results by a few hours, are perturbed only by sampling errors, and can hardly be construed a success story for pollsters. The other example is opinion research in the service of marketing. Here, the opinions of interest to manufacturers concern the sales of products in the market. When these products are bought by individual consumers, one unit at a time, and without much discussion with other consumers, then consumer choices may well resemble statistical distributions, more so than when such discussions would take place and influence these choices.

The more the public reality deviates from these atomistic accounts, the more do the theories of public opinion that are computed as such become theories of how analysts choose to aggregate their interview data.

5 Economic correlations

Must the reality of public opinion be bought?



To understand the results of public opinion research, one has to consider its embeddedness in a web of political and economic interests. Polling is expensive and polling results must be sellable to those who have a use for them and the resources to finance the effort of gathering costly data. Subscribing to rigorous scientific standards is not entirely incompatible with the need to sell findings. In the natural sciences, sponsored research is common. Fuelled largely by national interests – defence, administration, and technological or international development – research results in the sciences are expected to have unanticipated economic benefits elsewhere and they often do. But in sponsored public opinion research, the questions posed by sponsors are more directly linked to economic concerns and the use of scientific methods of polling has economic benefits as well. To elaborate, three observations will suffice.

First, having shown that, on the one hand, the powerful agency of public opinion is based on the metaphorical construction of an abstraction, and that, on the other hand, polling results are the artifacts of the way data are generated, processed and analysed, it would seem difficult to justify the tremendous effort required to generate what in the end are questionable results. However, this is not so. This seeming contradiction is ‘resolved’ by institutionalizing the correlation between the flow of economic resources that pay for generating data and the research questions being pursued and answered. Sponsors of public opinion polls have specific research questions in mind for which they need specific answers. Pollsters translate the sponsors’ questions and the answers they are paying to obtain into questions that interviewees can respond to. Notwithstanding the possibility of pollsters piggybacking additional questions to sponsored research, because polling agencies must demonstrate the usefulness of their findings to their clients, the questions that end up being answered through public opinion research are the questions that generate the needed resources; and these may have little to do with what ordinary people are thinking or concerned with.

This is not to say that polling results are necessarily biased when commissioned by special interest groups as pollsters like Gallup, Converse and Verba are eager to assure the public. The point to come back to below is that the questions of interest flow with the resources needed to answer them.

Second, polling is conservative of its preconceptions. The parties with vested interest in public opinion mostly know the possible answers to their questions but are not sure which will turn up to be correct and to what extent. Therefore, the task of polling agencies rarely is to find something new or unexpected but to validate or invalidate what their sponsors had in mind. Newness, if it enters public opinion research at all, is likely to come from elsewhere.

Third, the use of scientific methods by pollsters essentially serves as two rhetorical bypasses of the epistemological uncertainties associated with polling results, both serve ultimately economic functions:

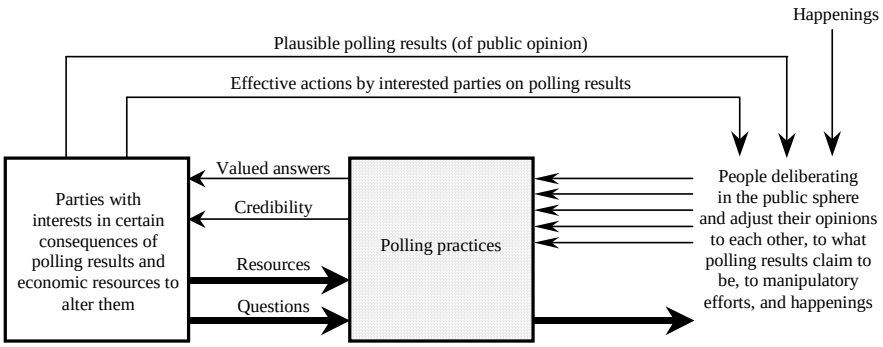
- To provide clients with the assurance that they can trust the research results, and rely on its findings – surprisingly without ever speaking of validity, of what the data represent, and what polls actually refer to.
- To establish the pollsters' credibility vis-à-vis their clients, and when polling results are published, also concerning their peers and the public. Being able to handle scientific methods is a ticket into the business of polling.

The pollsters' clients pay for both, scientifically processed answers to their questions, and the reputation of the polling organization they hire. The use of scientific methods in effect substitutes for the uncertainties about what polling data mean, which pollsters cannot remove. Elections are interesting in this regard. Citizens may perceive them as a sport in which their vote will eventually play a role. Someone will win for sure. But the 'intermediate score' that pollsters provide may be perceived to be about how well the candidates are doing, but in fact are colored by the interests of those who pay for the questions to be asked. The answers to these questions constitute the 'score.' Often, political campaign managers have a better sense of the public than what the rough percentages of polling results can tell. But what pollsters can provide and interested parties are willing to pay for is some measure of the economic risk involved in investing in one campaign or the other – often couched in terms of statistical significance.

Thus, given these economic correlations, what surfaces as public opinion is a statistics that sponsors are willing to pay for, pollsters are capable of translating into analysable question-answer pairs, and among which individual interviewees can choose. Pollsters can hardly afford bypassing economically profitable questions but making their results credible is what consumes most of their costs. From an economic perspective the concerns of ordinary citizens seem insignificant and unworthy of attention.

6 Public opinion as recursively constituted in what the public does with it

Are polls descriptive or do they create what they claim to describe?



There are public opinion polls that are proprietary and others that are published. Both affect, create, or construct public opinion but rather differently.

Proprietary polls, to start with them, are paid for by institutions with strategic interest in public opinion. Proprietary polling results are effective to the extent they inform the communicative efforts of their sponsors to change undesirable polling results into desirable ones. I speak of "polling results," not of public opinion, because what ordinary people do with messages that are aimed at changing their minds is an empirical question that cannot be answered by further polling. There are numerous methods that go beyond interviewing people; content analysis, for one; psychological experiments, for another, evaluating the persuasiveness of appeals. There are also ways of measuring correlates of public opinion changes – consumer spending, attendance in rallies, and the size of demonstrations. But if a sponsor acts on proprietary polling results, to assess the effectiveness of their interventions, these effects must be translated back into polling results. Hence, at least one important measure of the effects of actions taken on accounts of proprietary polling results is the change in future proprietary polling results – regardless of what they mean. Here 'public opinion' appears in a recursion. Interested parties change present polling results into future polling results. Polls feed on themselves without break.

Published polling results, by contrast, can affect public opinion on three levels; all three are involved in another recursion:

- They can inform members of the public about how pollsters and interested parties see the distribution of opinions in a population. Published polls often

are the only clues for people to come to know about the opinions of others beyond their ability to communicate with them directly.

- They can provide members of the public the choice of accepting polling results as adequate accounts of a public beyond direct experiences, or reject them completely or in parts, whatever the reason maybe. Since pollsters' reputation is at stake here, citations of the scientific methodology used in developing their findings is the most common rhetorical devices that pollsters have available.
- Once accepted, polling results can also enable members of the public to locate themselves within the distribution of published opinions and act according to the place at which they find themselves in that distribution. Public actions in response to knowing one's location within a distribution of opinions are not so simple. For example, when finding to be in the majority, people may enjoy being in that place, see no reason to do anything, to vote, for example, and might by this abstinence cause public opinion to shift its distribution. When in the minority, people may become energized to convert opponents in their community. They may also make an effort to blend into the majority by adopting their opinions, or become silenced by the apparent hopelessness of the situation as published. The latter is what Noelle Neumann (1993) theorized as 'spiral of silence.' But fitting oneself into a published distribution has far broader implications.

In either case, biased or not, addressing true public concerns or not, published polling results have a good chance of entering the conversations of those represented therein and thereby become part of public opinion. Polling results that nobody cares to publish, read, discuss, or act upon simply are ineffective. Polling results that compel people into accepting them become self-evidently real.

Obviously, the mass media participate decisively in the formation of public opinion – not because of their reporting on unexpected happenings or issues for individual attention or public scrutiny (their agenda-setting function); not because they cater to very large audiences, (homogenizing them); not because they are the means of industry's manipulatory efforts (generating income); but because they assertedly report on the concerns of people that ordinarily cannot be reached conversationally, people that are just like those who expose themselves to the published polls. Polls thus expand the public beyond individual reach. The scientific arguments for this expansion tend to mystify many, but which news media to trust and therefore attend to does not. By making polling results plausible to mass audiences, the media participate in constructing public opinion, while giving the impression of merely reporting it.

According to Son-Ho Kim (2005a), in the mid 1970s, the mass media started to recognize the news value of polling results and began to establish their

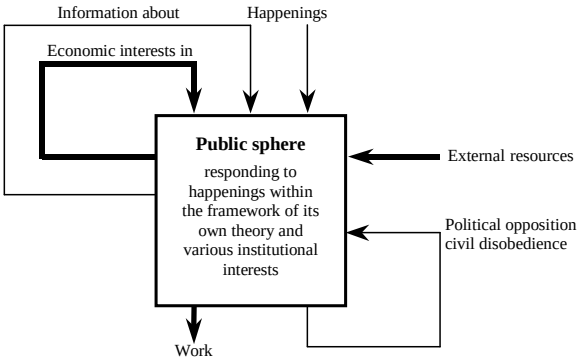
own polling operations. Kim (2005b) suggests that this shift resulted from the failure of commercial opinion polls during the 1972 U.S. Presidential election. Renowned pollsters like Gallup, Harris, Mitofsky, and Yankelovich testified in the U.S. Congress on the credibility of commissioned opinion polls and failed to agree on acceptable standards. He suggests that pollsters, in response to being accused of political biases, were eager to associate themselves with the supposedly fair news media. This shift did not change the polling methods, however. It merely shifted control over the polling questions from those with direct economic or political interests in the public to those thriving on the newsworthiness of polling results (cf. Schudson 1998: 224). In this new environment, polling questions came to be designed not to objectively report on the concerns of the public but to create news, i.e., generate findings that would surprise the public and attract audiences from news channels that reported less exciting opinion statistics. This shift did not affect the economics of polling either. It merely hid the economic interests in polling behind the competition among media for advertising dollars. This shift also demonstrates that adherence to scientific procedures is subordinate to the politics of objectivity, to the choice of a credible channel for disseminating polling results.

In the preceding figure, one may recognize the essential circularity within which public opinion is constructed. Once public opinion polls enter the deliberations in the public sphere – whether in the form of polling results or manipulative efforts to change previous findings – they do have a chance to become true and re-enter future polling results. To have the capability of feeding on itself, polling results must make public sense, of course, pass their critics' scrutiny, survive their commentators' criticism, do not contradict common experiences, and circulate within the public, through its institutions, and back.

Pollsters may have little to stand on when claiming that their findings represent the opinions of a public. But, by making compelling cases of them, filling the void of what cannot be experienced in public conversations and offering the members of the public a sense of where they stand, polls may well create what pollsters believe to be merely reporting. This includes reifying the image of public opinion as a powerful ruler to be feared or at least to be taken seriously.

7 Public sphere as a self-organizing system

Can those involved in constructing public opinion escape their own constructions?



The foregoing leads to the conclusion that public opinion does not exist as public opinion researchers claim it does but might be recognized in the effects of publishing the polling results and the efforts by various economically and politically motivated attempts to alter them. Even the most neutral social theories can affect what they theorize when reentering the process they claim to theorize (cf. Krippendorff 1996). This recursion is evident here as well.

All social constructions are constituted in the understanding that their constituents have of it and enact. Public opinion is no exception. It is constituted in concepts of public opinion for which numerous institutions compete – advertising, public relations, the mass media, politics, journalism, and last but not least the science of polling – each pursuing its own interests in shaping the concept of public opinion in its favour, and each relying on pollsters, social researchers, and relevant media to record and publicize it. These competing interest in the public result in a medley of what polling agencies are paid to say, what academic opinion researchers attempt to generalize, what the mass media deem worthy of publication, but, most importantly, of what the multiplicity of citizens discuss among themselves, including about distant others who are expected to engage in similar public discourse. As such, public opinion appears as a self-organizing system that preserves the uneasy network of conceptions of itself – not necessarily shared and certainly not fixed – within a boundary that is continuously perturbed by unexpected (truly new) happenings and by political opposition to this very institutionalization.

Thus, I am suggesting that public opinion should not be separated from its constituents, from the deliberations among ordinary people, pollsters, politicians,

and social scientists about what public opinion is for them. It is important to recognize the socially-politically constructed nature of the concept. Also, it would be a mistake to generalize one concept of public opinion at the expense of all others. It would destroy the deliberations that constitute the public, which a good theory of public opinion should make an effort to explain. If pollsters would have their say, the public nature of public opinion would disappear in favor of a collection of individual opinions. If commercial interests were to dominate the conception of public opinion, we would all become compliant consumers of profitable products. If politicians were to lead the way, we would all become followers of one kind of ideology or another. Journalists prefer to simplify public opinion in such binary terms as pro and con, agreements and disagreements, taking one position on a subject or the alternative, voting for one candidate or her opponent, or good guys and bad guys. Academic opinion researchers find it easier to regard a public atomistically, which allows them to scale, dimensionalize, cluster, or correlate the data and predict future distributions (not necessarily of individuals). As a social construction, public opinion resides in the interactions among its constituents who have competing conceptions of it. I do not think that this amounts to a domestication of public opinion, as Benjamin Ginsberg (1986) suggests, rendering the public docile and governable by the state. There are much too many competing interests involved for public opinion to be settled one way or another. I side more with Philip Converse (1996) here, who argues that polling has not replaced the political participation of people. If the institutions that struggle for dominance within the self-organizing system of public opinion do not leave enough space for dialogue and deliberation on what is important to the members of the public, then public unrest, civil disobedience, revolts, and even terrorism may well provide opportunities for the public to reassert itself and recapture the lost openness within its ever shifting self.

Is public opinion a single simple social construction? I would say no. Can those tinkering with different aspects of public opinion escape the effects of their own constructions? I would doubt it.

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