

# Is the relationship between press and pollsters too close for comfort?

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***Opinion Polls and the Media** provides a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between the media, opinion polls, and public opinion. The contributors explore how the media use opinion polls in a range of countries across the world, and analyses the effects and uses of opinion polls by the public as well as political actors. Reviewed by **Anthony Wells**.*

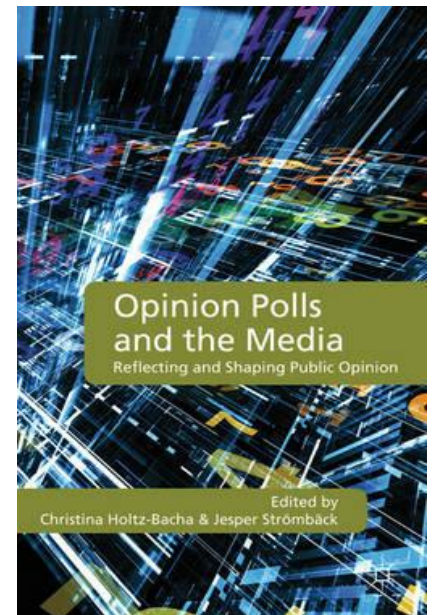


**Opinion Polls and the Media. Christina Holtz-Bacha and Jesper Strömbäck (eds.) Palgrave Macmillan. April 2012.**

*Opinion Polls and the Media* seeks to address the question of whether media opinion polls do more to measure and reflect public opinion, or more to influence it. While the book takes an international approach and doesn't directly address the British media and polls, the themes are very relevant to the topical issues of how the media influences political culture and debate that have been raised at Leveson.

The book addresses the symbiotic relationship between press and pollsters – pollsters in most cases grew out of the media and rely on the media for publicity and name recognition, while the press is drawn towards opinion polls to give them content that is exclusive to them, creates drama and an event, is easily understandable and allows the press to paint themselves as representatives of the public. Polls are also part of the culture of reporting and looking at politics as a “horse race” between parties, although whether they are a symptom of this or contribute to it is an open question.

In practice, the book ends up being more of a reader of the state of media opinion polling at present, running through what we need to consider in answering the question, rather than offering any firm conclusions. Chapters summarise the legal regulations pollsters face in different countries, some of the methodological challenges facing polling today and the various theories that have put forward on how polling influences public opinion. The bulk of the volume though is made up chapters looking at the state of polling in a selection of countries, chosen to represent a spread of democracies from all continents and states of development.



Strong common themes come through in USA, Germany and France, of polls with a close relationship with the media that are increasingly a major part of political reporting (though not always well reported) particularly in a context of “horse race” politics. The departures from the pattern (and therefore the more interesting chapters) are opinion polling in Taiwan and South Africa. The nascent opinion polling industry in Taiwan seems to have been so swamped by fake, methodologically dubious and skewed polls and awful media reporting that public faith in them has collapsed, even though the minority of properly conducted polls have a decent record. South Africa is an even more fascinating example – a country where there was a blooming polling industry in the run up to the end of apartheid that appears to have all but withered and died in the years since. Perhaps because of the expense of polling in South Africa, the lack of interest of commercial market research companies in carrying out political polling as a loss-leader or the uncompetitive and infrequent nature of South Africa’s elections opinion polling seems have faded away.

While a core question in considering how polls measure and influence public opinion is the way the media report them, the various authors are somewhat limited by what is reasonably quantifiable, frequently looking at the proportion of poll reporting that is about the “horse race” or the proportion that includes methodological information about how the poll was conducted. The latter may be important, and could even be a proxy for how serious the media are about treating polling, but it is probably less of an issue than how the media interpret and present polling. Whether it is treated sensibly or, as Mills and Tiffen write in their chapter on Australian polls, whether commercial pressures lead to them dramatised and exaggerated to maximise their impact.

At times the book does also seem to underestimate or overlook the potential impact of the internet on polling and its relationship with the media. Online polling is mentioned in many parts of the book, but often as a throwaway paragraph or a potential development for the future, whereas it has been a growing factor for a decade now, and one that in some markets is an increasingly significant force with consequential impacts on frequency of polling, costs for media clients and low barriers to entry for new polling companies.

This may be partly to do with the chapter on methodological challenges being solely focused upon the USA, where polling on the internet has faced a difficult challenge in establishing itself and where cellphone only households are a particular problem (one exacerbated by the somewhat surreal restraint that US pollsters can only legally conduct interviews on cellphones if they dial them by hand). I am no doubt looking at the issue from a biased viewpoint as an internet pollster who doesn’t need to worry about mobile phones, but I would have thought that mobile phones and the internet are equal challenges facing the industry!

The slightest part of the volume is the final section, addressing the core question of how opinion polling influences public opinion and elections, which doesn’t go much further than summarising the various theories and past work that has been done on the subject. Then, again, the book

doesn't claim to answer everything, but to be a springboard towards further research. More it prizes open the can and puts the questions out there to be answered – and they are certainly good questions.

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