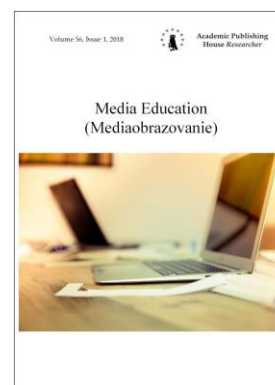




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TV News Coverage of Election-related Public Opinion Data: Media Literacy is Necessary for Their Consuming

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Abstract

The paper explores the media reportage of polling issues on the example of television network news coverage over the 2019 presidential and parliament elections in Ukraine. The importance of television news programs for viewers' understanding the public situation is emphasized. The author analyzes theoretical, methodological, and legal approaches to the media use of opinion polls. The study examines the peculiarities of TV presenting essential poll information which provides viewers with the ability to independently evaluate the poll's validity and reliability. The findings reveal that the TV channels sometimes have avoided disclosing such information or presented it selectively and incompletely. Incorrect poll-based covering confuses the audience, interfering people to distinguish the real dimensions of public opinion from their imitation. The research also investigates different aspects of these occurrences, and it is focused on the analyzing of existing problems in the sphere of news reporting opinion data and searching efforts and opportunities to avoiding it. The article gives some recommendations to TV channels on poll coverage, as well as viewers for verifying factual data of newscast. Indeed, the enhancement of media education and media literacy will help eradicate the incorrect poll coverage and support the public demand for high-quality poll-based media content.

Keywords: TV news, opinion polls, poll coverage, media education, media literacy.

1. Introduction

Media have been playing increasingly important roles in people's daily life and in education (Fedorov, Levitskaya, 2018: 11). As a consequence, they influence significantly how people perceive and understand reality. Despite the dynamic growth of the Internet share in media consumption, traditional media, especially television, managed to maintain the audience commitment. Moreover, the status quo shows that television is finding a new form of an existence (Izrael, 2015: 43) and continues to be an important source of news and information for citizens of different countries.

For instance, television is the main place 70 % of Russians say they turn to for news (D-Russia.ru, 2019). 80 % of respondents from the United Kingdom also watch traditional TV on a weekly basis (Statista, 2019). The percentage of Americans who get news often from television is almost half the population – 49 % (Shearer, 2018). 66 % of Ukrainians use TV for news reception (InMind, 2019: 11). Overall, television is still a popular platform for news consumption – even though its use has declined recently.

Contemporary television content covers events from all spheres of people's life. TV also reports survey findings and puts them on the public agenda. Journalists use the results of polls to

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confirm arguments, illustrate real-life situations in society, and most often refer to them during elections. Much earlier M. Goot and T.W. Beed (Goot, Beed, 1979: 141) observed that "during an election, to talk about politics is to talk about the polls".

Since 2019 was the year of two election campaigns for Ukraine – presidential and parliamentary, the share of such messages was significant. It should be noted that elections of the President of Ukraine were held in two rounds: the first on March 31, the second – on April 21; the parliamentary elections were held on July 21. And these campaigns are still of interest because of the unwavering reflection on the extraordinary nature of both the elections themselves and their results.

At the start of the 2019 election period, the Sociological Association of Ukraine called on the media to check the sources of information and strictly adhere to the requirements for publicizing the results of public opinion polls. Concerns have been raised by sociologists as with the election approaching, fake and unprofessional data emerge: "Media publishes material... without mandatory methodological information to evaluate data" (Institute..., 2019). Incorrect poll-based media reporting confuses the audience, interferes real understanding of public attitudes to certain events and processes. Consequently, it has a negative impact on the socio-political situation in the country. At the same time, viewers rightly expect the accuracy and reliability of poll-based media texts.

2. Materials and methods

The material for this study are news programs of leading Ukrainian TV channels. The news is most fully implementing one of the main television functions – informational. TV newscast, especially of leading channels, is always in the spotlight of political and public attention. News programs are the epicenter of television broadcasting (Nedopytanskiy, 2006). They model the information picture of the day, turning the average citizen into an indirect participant in socio-political events. News programs certify the level and public weight of their channel on the country's television market and determine the channel's policy.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate news programs on the Ukraine's TV on the subject of presenting results of public opinion polls during the 2019 election contests. The research tasks are to collect empirical data, consider the standards of media coverage of such information, examine the providing the "minimal essential information" (Welch, 2002: 111) about election-oriented polls, and explore the trends of polling issues reportage in the context of elections.

In order to fulfill the stated tasks, I explored the following news releases: "TSN" (channel 1+1), "Today" (channel "Ukraine") and "Facts" (channel ICTV) broadcasted during the last two elections in Ukraine. There were two main reasons for such a selection. Firstly, these TV broadcasters have the forefront positions on the Ukrainian television market. According to the representative surveys (National..., 2019), these channels have consistently led the ratings in the whole 2019 election period. Secondly, mentioned newscast programs are the most popular among Ukrainian audience. On the channel "Ukraine", news "Today" is the uncontested leader of informational broadcast, and its prime time issues (Monday – Saturday, 19.00) were watched by 25.7 million viewers in the studied period (Ukraine, 2019). As for the channel 1 + 1, "TSN" (Monday – Friday, 19.30) has a top position concerning television viewing. By the SOCIS research, "TSN" news program is the most rated on Ukrainian television (SOCIS, 2019). Finally, ICTV broadcasts news "Facts". For the research, I chose one of its issues (Monday – Saturday, 18.45) which is the most popular news program of this channel according to my survey results (n = 400), and comes out in prime time viewing hours as well as other studied newscasts. Eventually, I have collected 84 election-related news stories covering public opinion data.

The research was conducted by combining theoretical and empirical methods of investigation. The study used such methods as: review of the literature on the stated subject, selection and discussion of theoretical material, comparative method, content analysis with comparative elements and combined qualitative and quantitative data and analysis.

3. Discussion

In most cases, news is a compromise between different political, economic, cultural, professional influences, which shifts significantly in election campaigns. And news not meeting the standards of professional journalism is opposed to news produced according to all rules of the genre (Zernetska et al, 2005: 10). Thus, while the objectivity of television news is debatable, news programs are most characterized by it. Today, people by means of television news reporting find out about affairs in all areas to understand them and know how to deal with them. J. Višňovský,

L. Greguš, J. Mináriková, and K. Kubíková indicate that newscast is one of the main determinants of opinion-making (Višňovský et al., 2019: 51). A similar thought is expressed by T. Fedoriv, saying that television news is one of the most visible elements of viewers' formation of the "image of the world", which naturally influences their decisions and actions (Fedoriv, 2004: 3).

Besides, A. Wonneberger, K. Schoenbach and L. van Meurs conclude that viewers' interest in the news mostly depends on external contexts than the individuals' intrinsic stimulus which means that news audiences may get bigger or diminish due to circumstances (Wonneberger et al., 2011: 325-343). For instance, the media consumers are more actively engaged in the news during the elections.

It is precisely during election campaigns that the media report the largest number of polls: candidate ratings, confidence in parties, electoral characteristics of voters, etc. J. Strömbäck proves the media's use of opinion polls has become an important part of their coverage of elections (Strömbäck, 2012: 1). C. Atkin and J. Gaudino also say that survey findings are one of the leading categories of news, particularly during election campaigns (Atkin, Gaudino, 1984: 119). According to Y. Bhatti and R.T. Pedersen, polls play a key part in news media coverage of elections (Bhatti, Pedersen, 2016: 129). By C. Holtz-Bacha's standpoint, across the world, polls have long become a major staple of media reporting (Holtz-Bacha, 2012: 267).

Extensive polls involvement can be explained by several reasons. Firstly, as T. Petersen denotes, in fact, the media need survey results as they offer information that their users expect (Petersen, 2012: 47). Secondly, these developments may also be related to evolving models of news broadcasting. The near voracious demand for content of 24-hour rolling broadcast news and the internet usage, combined with lessening resources in the newsroom, have made for the centrality of polls in the media (Dunaway, 2011; Frankovic, 2012). In such a context, there is no wonder that news organizations seize the polls opportunities to create media content. Additionally, public opinion polling is getting very important in present-day civilizations as people's viewpoints and reactions turn to be ever more changeable and opinion poll data become ever more easily accessible.

Paradoxically, however, despite the active media use of polls, the relevance of their coverage remains debatable. J. Strömbäck indicates that the question is to whether the media's reporting on opinion polls should be considered as detrimental or beneficial is still open and contested (Strömbäck, 2009: 55). Nonetheless, scientists agree the media, through their use of opinion polls, both reflect and shape public opinion (Atkin, Gaudino, 1984: 119). Similarly, Holtz-Bacha denotes that the media not only produce their own news but also – intentionally or not – intervene in the political process through the publication of poll results (Holtz-Bacha, 2012: 267). This view is supported by P. Moy and E.M. Rinke, they emphasize the role that polls play in the citizen-policy maker relationship hinges upon their dissemination by the media (Moy, Rinke, 2012: 225).

As J. Strömbäck says, published opinion polls matter more than opinion polls in general (Strömbäck, 2012b). Moreover, L.L. Kaid and J. Strömbäck prove convincingly that present-day elections are really mediated happenings to politicians and parties, and their public audiences in terms of displaying differences in political systems and media alignments around the world (Kaid, Strömbäck, 2008). In this discussion, P.O. Tryggvason and J. Strömbäck consider that one of the main democratic purposes of the media is to give people necessary information they need to be free and self-governing. This is evenly significant when presenting opinion polls (Tryggvason, Strömbäck, 2018). In such a context, media opinion polls data make a valuable contribution to the democratic process, promote the development of civil society, and encourage parties and politicians to a higher level of responsibility. In open societies without any monopoly on truth, everyone's opinion is important and public monitoring becomes an integral part of daily life. S.R. Gawiser and G.E. Witt underline that polls provide the best direct source of information on public opinion. They are valuable tools for journalists and can serve as the base for accurate and informative news reports (Gawiser, Witt, 2006).

Simultaneously, there are also negative aspects of poll coverage. For example, among shortcomings of television news' portrayal of the elections, S.J. Farnsworth and S.R. Lichter highlight the damaging focus on horse-race coverage of the winnings and modest attention is paid to matters of substance. Coverage that focuses on the horse race shortchanges candidates trying to talk about issues, and voters who think about issues. The questions voters ask of candidates are about a lot more than who is gaining or losing ground in the poll (Farnsworth, Lichter, 2008: 54). D.-M. Ordway agree that journalists' covering elections focus primarily on who's winning or losing – instead of on policy issues – voters, candidates and the news industry itself suffer (Ordway,

2019). Nevertheless, this focus on the horse race is becoming more common in today's news and is a ubiquitous part of election contests coverage (Bhatti, Pedersen, 2016; Strömbäck, 2012).

Considering the prominence and power of the media in the election process, evidently, informing the audience about the poll, the media must strictly adhere to journalism standards, such as credibility, truthfulness, accuracy, unbiasedness, timeliness, clarity, etc. Additionally, the representativeness of public opinion is also important within the social and political aspect of the news (Nedopytanskiy, 2006).

F. Pétry and F. Bastien emphasize that pollsters' reports should be a basic element to consider in any attempt to improve the accuracy level of media covering the horse race (Pétry, Bastien, 2013). As such, it is best for journalists to follow the interpretations that they find in pollsters' reports. For the news media to provide information about public opinion polls properly, S.R. Gawiser and G.E. Witt developed 20 questions journalists should ask about poll results (Gawiser, Witt, 2006). When covering polls, R.L. Welch advises to use the standards established by the American Association for Public Opinion Researchers (AAPOR) and the National Council on Public Polls (NCP) (Welch, 2002: 105).

It should be noted that Ukrainian legislation contains a number of requirements for the coverage of election-related poll information. Both laws "On the Elections of People's Deputies of Ukraine" and "On the Election of the President of Ukraine", which were in force during the 2019 elections, put similar norms. They pointed out that media, while presenting the election-oriented survey results, have to provide information on full name of polling organization, carried out the survey; customers who ordered the survey; the dates of fieldwork; territory of the survey; size and method of forming a sample; precise wording of questions; survey methods; possible statistical error (The Law..., 1999; 2011).

Obviously, this information is easiest to provide in reports of opinion polls published online or in print. Nevertheless, according to European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research (ESOMAR) and World Association for Public Opinion Research (WAPOR), all video reports must include methodological information about the conduct and sponsorship of the opinion poll, the timing of the interviews and the interview method (ESOMAR/WAPOR, 2014: 8). By these requirements, comparatively less information about polls is required.

At first, the media should specify the name of the organization, which conducted the poll. If it is unknown, such data should not be published. During the 2019 elections, the Sociological Association of Ukraine indicated that the destructive activities of bogus services, little-known or completely unknown organizations that distributed pseudo-polls had a negative impact on the socio-political situation in the country (Institute..., 2019). Therefore, journalists should evaluate whether certain surveys can be trusted and the data of certain companies disseminated.

Furthermore, the audience should be informed about who ordered the poll and paid for it. This, in turn, will explain why the poll was conducted. It is crucial to provide citizens with open and complete information about funding sources so that they could make informed decisions.

Another significant information moment is the time of the survey. The fact is that events can dramatically change people's minds and, as a result, offset poll findings. The interpretation of the survey should be based on the context in which the events were conducted. Also, a poll conducted a few months ago (which is very long in the electoral process) may be interesting for history, but not for news, because it loses its representativeness and relevance.

Finally, it is important to tell the audience the survey method (face-to-face, telephone interview, internet access panel, mixed mode, etc.). Although telephone and online surveys are the most common in the world, personal interviews are still the most methodologically grounded in Ukraine. It should also be noted that telephone surveys are quite reliable, and sometimes they are the only way reach the respondents because of the obstacles of watchmen and door locks of buildings in cities. But a general online survey cannot be conducted because not all residents of the country use the internet. Surveys on streets, shops, and other accessible public places may provide interesting material for life stories, but they cannot be considered as opinion polls. Media coverage within the above methodological categories will allow journalists to communicate well the poll results and provide the audience with reliable information.

4. Results

Having analyzed the literature on the media coverage of polls results I considered TV news reporting a public opinion data taking into account whether the information was provided about:

the organization that conducted the survey, poll sponsor, survey method, and the time of its holding. I followed ESOMAR and WAPOR's recommendations, deliberately narrowing the list of information the media should make it public. I was guided by several considerations. Firstly, both of these institutions are very prominent sources that offer standards for media coverage of polls. Secondly, these rules are specifically for video reports, which is completely in line with the specifics of my research on TV news. Thirdly, the detailed analysis of the media coverage of these categories will provide a sufficient basis to determine and understand the overall picture of presenting poll-related data on Ukrainian television.

The findings show that completeness and the quality of media reportage of polling results are very uneven. Some methodological categories are more often represented, and some are almost always ignored. According to the study, polling organizations were usually named in television news. Journalists either voiced their names or noted in the infographic on video. The research results also prove that newscast programs mostly indicate the dates of the surveys. Instead, journalists less frequently informed about the survey method.

Besides, the study found that the disclosing the sponsor – the organization(s) or person(s) who paid for the poll – is the most problematic. In this context, it is worth noting that the NGO Centre for Democracy and Rule of Law (CEDEM) sent requests to the four most respected in Ukraine polling companies (Social Monitoring Centre, Rating, Razumkov Centre, and Kyiv International Institute of Sociology) demanding to disclose the customers and purchasers of the electoral opinion polls. The NGO referred to the law "On the Elections of People's Deputies of Ukraine", under which the information about the customer of the polls must be open. According to the appeal, people have the right to know who ordered the polls, and such information would help to define which polls are trustworthy (CEDEM, 2019). However, the polling centers stated in response that since the law does not impose such obligations on them, they have the right not to disclose information about the customer (KIIS, 2019). In fact, these companies refused to make public the data about opinion poll sponsors.

Thus, this situation demonstrates contradictions in the legislation. On the one hand, the law requires the media to disclose customer information, but on the other hand, it does not establish the same rule for polling organizations. Under these circumstances, the latter does not provide this information to the media. Besides, it should be noted that in Ukraine there is no actual responsibility for rule violations when informing about the poll. There is also no regulator in the country to monitor the law compliance when publishing polls data and prosecute for violations. National Council of Television and Radio Broadcasting of Ukraine only carries out monitoring of election campaigns coverage by the media.

After examining the polls data broadcast on Ukrainian television it can be stated that providing methodological information for poll data quality assessment is problematic. TV channels frequently provided some information and at the same time consistently did not disclose other poll information. According to research, channels did a good job of covering the polling organization. In all TV news, this was clearly the most reported item (98.8 %). Instead, less poll-based news stories indicated survey dates (82 %). The interview method was the third most covered category on all channels, although this total was not reported as much as the previous two things (69 %). Simultaneously, news programs almost never provided other information. This was particularly the case with the poll sponsor, which was covered only once. Taking all these factors together produces the following picture (Fig. 1), which shows how news on the leading TV channels broadcasted necessary poll information during the 2019 elections in Ukraine.

Actually, such incomplete information traps can be considered as preventing viewers from accurately and correctly interpreting the poll results. Indeed, full polling information provides viewers with the ability to independently evaluate the reliability of polls.

However, it should be noted that the shortcomings in the media coverage of the polls are not unique to Ukraine. For instance, F. Pétry and F. Bastien identified frequent inaccuracies in journalistic interpretations of the horse race and of change over time in poll reports in Canada (Pétry, Bastien, 2013). According to R. Mattes, in South Africa few, if any, news reporters have developed any methodological expertise about the advantages or limitations of polling data, or how to interpret it (Mattes, 2012:191). S.J. Farnsworth and S.R. Lichter noted that television news on the presidential contests has been marked by the less-than-satisfactory performance with respect to the journalists' cardinal issues of accuracy and fairness in the USA (Farnsworth, Lichter, 2008:

43). Similarly, B. Toff certified the erosion of news organizations' abilities to assert independent gatekeeping standards around individual poll results in the United States (Toff, 2017: 873).

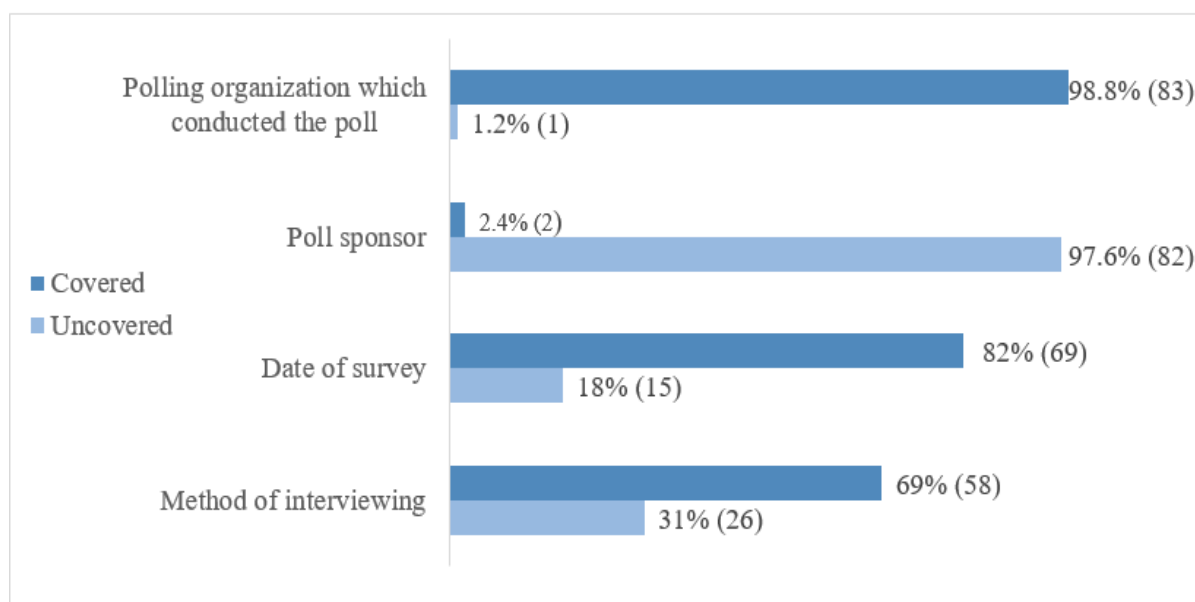


Fig. 1. Percentage and number of TV news stories reporting methodological poll information
Note: number of articles is in parentheses.

5. Conclusion

In today's society, media, including television, are a powerful institution without which the operation of public authority is impossible. News as one of the most demanded media products contributed significantly to articulating the social meanings of society. Television news enhances the audience awareness of reality.

Opinion polls, published in media, influence discussions and decision-making in almost all areas of public life. They are also becoming a key item of covering elections. Poll-based news both reflect attitudes and preferences of citizens and form them. In the context of citizen information support, poll-related news play a role in understanding the events and processes taking place in the country. Complete, accurate, and unbiased information helps people to adequately understand and properly interpret the survey results, separate the real dimensions of public opinion from their imitation. Therefore, it is important to properly disseminate polling data. The media disclosing the essential methodological information on how the survey was conducted helps the public to determine a poll's validity and reliability. Failure to comply with these principles violates the right of citizens to receive objective information about elections and other events. Therefore, it is in the interest of the audience to know more about polls that are made public. However, as the research results show, polls can be misinterpreted by the media.

Speaking about ways to overcome the negative phenomena in the media reporting polls associated with its television presenting, I can distinguish a few important aspects.

Firstly, enhancing journalists' professionalism. As the function of the media is to help the audience become savvy consumers of public opinion polls, journalists have to do a thorough, professional job covering polls. Only on condition of adequate disclosure of polling information, viewers become informed participants in political discourse. Taking into account the social significance of poll-based news and the importance of interpreting it correctly, media professionals must meet standards of poll coverage, offering solid grounding in the form of methodological survey information needed to assess the quality of polls data. The media must also check the credibility and competence of the sources of information. These questions are directly related to the skills and knowledge of reporters. I think it is necessary to introduce the topics of polling coverage into the educational process of students-journalists. As for working journalists, it is possible to help close the gap by means of specialized literature, online resources, and training programs.

Secondly, increasing media accountability for disseminating incomplete and untrusted poll-based information. Nowadays in Ukraine there is a problem with the regulation and control over

the dissemination of poll data. There is no one institution that could restrict or limit the unfair poll coverage. In this regard, the powers of public authorities (primarily the National Council of Television and Radio Broadcasting) should be expanded to allow monitoring and taking appropriate measures in cases of non-compliance and violation of legislative norms by journalists and media owners, including election rules.

Thirdly, polling organizations should provide complete and comprehensive information about their research. Presenting results, researchers must make available information about how the poll was conducted. As the number of surveys is growing steadily, they are becoming more complex and diverse, so disclosure requirements matter, and researchers should provide full information on their methodology and characteristics. If polling companies are open enough and provide a comprehensive amount of information in their reports, the media will have more opportunities to provide the public with full survey data.

Finally, the last item in this list, however, is perhaps the first in value. Due to the need for safe, effective and competent use of media texts by the public, there is a necessity for media education, and its studying by every person throughout life. Media literacy is one of the opportunities to perceive election-oriented poll results. The ability to interpret the poll-based data correctly should not be limited to a narrow range of experts. In a democratic society, it is important for everyone to be able to distinguish manipulative messages, not to be misled by distorted information, and to understand the real possibilities and limitations of representative polls. Moreover, it is obvious that the need to be media literate consumers of polls will only grow as opinion polls have increased in number and variety and polling data has become more important to public and civic discourse.

Awareness and understanding of whether media provide enough information to determine the polls' reliability and validity, or whether the media cover them accurately and comprehensively, without missing essential methodological details, will help the public resist survey profanation and data manipulation, and will not be deceived by fake polls. Citizens will become competent consumers of opinion poll-related news by analyzing media products carefully and critically. As a result, they will thus contribute to improving the quality of media content, as the media literate audience is only able to create demand for high-quality media.

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