

The Market Place of Political Opinions: Public Opinion Polling and its Publics in Transnational Perspective, 1930–1950

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RESÜMEE

Der Markt der politischen Meinungen. Meinungsforschung und ihre Öffentlichkeiten in transnationaler Perspektive, 1930–1950

Dieser Artikel analysiert die wirtschaftliche und mediale Dynamik, die der Einführung und schnellen Verbreitung der repräsentativen Meinungsforschung zwischen 1930 und 1950 zugrunde lag. Der Artikel bringt dabei verschiedene Forschungsansätze der letzten Jahre zusammen. Er verbindet den Prozess der Medialisierung mit den Kategorien von „Aufmerksamkeit“ und „Vertrauen“ um aufzuzeigen, wie Zeitgenossen zunächst mit dieser neuen Wissenstechnik vertraut wurden, und warum sie der neuartigen Darstellung von „öffentlicher Meinung“ Glauben schenkten. Dabei betont er insbesondere die transnationale Situierung des Einführungsprozesses, die in der bestehenden Literatur bislang nur am Rande behandelt wird. Tatsächlich ist die schnelle Verbreitung der repräsentativen Meinungsforschung nicht nur eine gemeinsame Erfahrung von Demokratien seit den dreißiger Jahren des 20. Jahrhunderts, sondern ein genuin transnationaler Prozess, der auf dem Austausch von Ideen, Praktiken und Personal beruht und der beeinflusst wurde von Beobachtungen der Entwicklungen in anderen Ländern.

It is often ignored that public opinion polls cost money. Someone, some institution or organization needs to be prepared to carry the costs associated with the process of opinion surveying. In 1939, an employee of the recently founded *Institut Français d'Opinion Publique* in Paris estimated the costs of a normal representative survey to be around 25,000 Franc, which amounts to the equivalent of roughly € 7,500 in today's money in terms of purchasing power.¹ What then were the interests of those who ultimately had

1 L. Blondiaux, *La fabrique de l'opinion. Une histoire sociale des sondages*, Paris 1998, 301, Fn 31.

to fund these surveys? The answer to this question allows the historian to make sense of the explosive growth of opinion polling in the period between 1930 and 1950: it is only through the analysis of commercial and media dynamics that we can explain the rapid diffusion of this new knowledge technique in this period. This paper employs the categories of ‘attention’ and ‘trust’ to describe opinion polling as a communicative practice. It takes its cue from Georg Franck’s notion of an ‘economy of attention’: in a culture characterized by an over-supply of information, the real challenge for any participant in the market-place – regardless of whether he wants to sell goods, ideas, news, or ideology – is to entice contemporaries to invest their precious time into one’s own offerings, thereby crowding out those of one’s competitors.² But Franck spends little time on the question of how this attention, once gained, can be sustained. Recent scholarship has highlighted the importance of trust as a significant form of social capital which underpins relationships, not least that between audiences and experts.³ This paper then tries to trace how mid-twentieth-century contemporaries learned of public opinion polling, and how they came to accept and trust this new representation of public opinion. In doing so, it will look at three interrelated aspects: public opinion polling’s foundation myth in the mid-1930s; the internationalization of polling in the subsequent decade; and the effects of market dynamics on the practice of opinion pollsters. It thus hopes to attract attention to the crucial transnational dimension of public opinion polling which has been largely ignored by existing studies of the history of opinion polling. Yet the rise of opinion polling is not only a common characteristic of democracies in the course of the twentieth century. It is also a genuinely international development, based on an exchange of ideas, practices and personnel across borders, and influenced by the observation of events and advances in other countries.

1. Foundation Myth

Let us begin with the foundation myth reproduced in almost every single history of political opinion polling: the breakthrough of representative opinion surveys based on statistical probability models on the occasion of the American presidential elections of 1936.⁴ This breakthrough was associated with a particular name, to which the American mass media soon added a face: Dr. George Gallup.⁵ He benefited from a particularly American media tradition of attention production, namely the ‘straw poll’. Gallup is of central importance for the internationalization of political opinion surveying, and it is therefore worthwhile engaging more closely with the media dynamics which created this

2 G. Franck, *Ökonomie der Aufmerksamkeit*, Munich 1998.

3 N. Luhmann, *Vertrauen. Ein Mechanismus der Reduktion sozialer Komplexität*, Stuttgart 2000; U. Frevert (ed.), *Vertrauen. Historische Annäherungen*, Göttingen 2003.

4 For a typical periodization, see W. Albig, *Two Decades of Opinion Study 1936–1956*, in: *Public Opinion Quarterly* 21 (1957) 1, 14–22.

5 From 1937, the *Washington Post* began including a portrait photo of Gallup in his weekly opinion column.

‘breakthrough’, and which attracted attention to both the ‘new’ opinion measurement technique and to Gallup.

Already in the nineteenth century, newspapers and journals reported on a variety of local or regional straw polls, especially in the context of presidential elections; in the late nineteenth century the media itself began initiating such polls.⁶ Not only did such polls generate attention among consumers, they also resulted in some early assumptions about the political effects of such attention production. Commenting on the changes in popularity ratings among the various Republican candidates in the run-up to the presidential elections of 1908, the *Washington Post* thought that a considerable number of people polled in recent straw polls ‘are simply climbing on the band wagon, and put themselves in the column of the candidate known to be in the lead.’⁷ In the early 1920s, the concept of such a ‘bandwagon’ effect had already gained such currency that it was used by politicians as a rhetorical device in their rebuttal of displeasing straw polls and in their engagement with political opponents. In the final weeks before the presidential elections of 1924, for example, a leading Democratic spokesman denounced the results of a particular straw poll as being part of a Republican campaign ‘to deceive the public into believing that President Coolidge is a sure winner and thus capture the “bandwagon” vote.’⁸

It is no coincidence that this criticism was directed at a straw poll conducted by the weekly magazine *Literary Digest*. This magazine had been among the first to recognize the commercial potential of such polls and was the first publication to have a stab at conducting a ‘national’ straw poll, in the run-up to the presidential election of 1916.⁹ From 1920 onwards the *Literary Digest*’s straw polls assumed ever more spectacular dimensions. These polls served to attract further attention to the magazine within the highly competitive American media market, with the intention of gaining more subscribers, and thus ultimately to increase subscription and advertisement income.¹⁰ As an advertising strategy, the straw polls worked wonders. For a short while during the 1920s, the *Digest* boasted the highest circulation of any American current affairs weekly, with 1.5 million readers in 1925.¹¹ In the run-up to the presidential election of 1932, the *Digest* made use of its own subscribers’ address list, as well as telephone and car-owner directories, and sent out more than twenty million straw ballots.¹² During the six weeks before the elections in early November 1932, continuous updates on the incoming returns from the *Digest*’s straw poll were an established part of American election news

6 See C. E. Robinson, *Straw Votes. A Study of Political Prediction*, New York 1932; T. Smith, *The First Straw*, in: *Public Opinion Quarterly* 54 (1990) 1, 21–36; S. Herbst, *Numbered voices: how opinion polling has shaped American politics*, Chicago 1993, 69–87.

7 *Washington Post*, 2 February 1908: For Taft or Hughes, 6.

8 *New York Times*, 10 October 1924: Charges Straw Votes are to Fool Public, 3.

9 The journal conducted a readers’ survey involving 30,000 respondents in five selected states; in four of these its predictions were proved correct by the elections, see *New York Times*, 18 October 1932: Denies the *Digest* Erred in 1916 Poll, 11.

10 For the steady growth of the *Digest*’s straw polls, see C. Robinson, *Straw Votes* (Fn 6), 51.

11 D. E. Sumner, *The magazine century: American magazines since 1900*, New York 2010, 91.

12 *Washington Post*, 31 October 1932: *Straw Votes*, 6.

coverage.¹³ And when the election results were announced, it transpired that the Digest's straw poll had been uncannily accurate in its prediction, missing Roosevelt's eventual share of the popular vote by only 0.4 per cent.¹⁴ It was the fourth accurate prediction of a presidential election in a row, a fact not lost on contemporaries. Some papers suggested calling off the elections and using the Digest instead; frustrated Republicans saw it as clear evidence of bandwagon voting and called for a ban on straw polls.¹⁵ Its track record allowed the Literary Digest to adopt the marketing slogan 'sounding board of American opinion' to capture advertising clients' attention.¹⁶ At this point in time, the Digest's straw polls were an established brand, based primarily on their reputation for size and historical accuracy.

Like any other commercially successful operation the success of the Literary Digest attracted imitators. Clearly, the production of quantitative surveys of individual views constituted a sellable product. That was not just true for the observation of *consumer* preferences. Its findings, as American market researchers had successfully demonstrated for some decades, could be sold as exclusive, arcane knowledge to consumer industries, which used them as a strategic steering device in turn. The Digest straw polls allowed contemporaries to appreciate that within the competitive American media market survey results of *citizens'* opinions had a news value and thereby a commercial value, too. The challenge, now, was to offer the same service as the Literary Digest poll, but more cheaply by way of a different methodological procedure, which would make it possible to increase the frequency of surveys, and thereby offer a product which conformed better to the media logic of political news reporting. It was no coincidence that those players entering the media market in 1935 with surveys based on representative quota samples were all and without exception established market researchers. They were able to offer their expertise in quota sampling, and at the same time were trusted by publishers as market research experts because their method had already been demonstrated to work in the area of commercial attention measurement.¹⁷ At the same time, they were able to keep down costs of market entry by making use of their existing cohort of interviewers, and could benefit from future synergies.¹⁸

Although there were a number of opinion survey companies which used such a novel purposive design quota-sampling method from 1935 onwards, as far as the wider public was concerned it was a method associated primarily with George Gallup after 1936.

13 The New York Times, for example, made references to the Literary Digest 'poll' in a total of 76 articles in the period between 21 September and election day on 8 November 1932.

14 See New York Times, 10 November 1932: Digest Poll Missed by Only Two Votes, 11; New York Times, 17 November 1932: Topics of the Time. Close Enough Forecasting, 18.

15 D. E. Sumner, *The magazine century* (Fn 11), 91; New York Times, 29 November 1932: Mr Rogers Finds a Republican Who Is Fed Up on Straw Votes, 21. Subsequently, a bill was introduced in Congress in 1935, but did not gain a majority, see Washington Post, 19 March 1935: The Straw Vote, 8.

16 *Printers'Ink*, 155 (1931) 2, 54-55.

17 J. M. Converse, *Survey Research in the United States. Roots and Emergence 1890-1960*, Berkeley 1987, 111-117.

18 D. J. Robinson, *The Measure of Democracy. Polling, Market Research, and Public Life 1930-1945*, Toronto 1999, 48.

Why? Because he knew best how to make use of the *Literary Digest*'s reputation, and how to exploit the focus of attention during a presidential election, by seeking a high-profile confrontation with the market leader. At this point, the concept of 'brand recognition' was already widely established within American market research, and negative advertising too was being studied by marketing experts.¹⁹ Gallup was one of them: in 1928, he had completed his PhD dissertation, 'An Objective Method for Determining Reader Interest in the Content of a Newspaper'; in 1932, he became vice-president and director of research for the advertising firm Young and Rubicam in New York, and taught at Columbia's School of Journalism from 1933.²⁰ He was therefore well aware of the news value of conflict within the media market, and he positioned his product accordingly. Already four months prior to the presidential election of 1936, Gallup pronounced in one of his syndicated newspaper columns that the *Literary Digest* poll was known for its size and historical accuracy: but this time, with the election a close race, polling methodology would play a crucial role, and in this respect the *Digest* poll would suffer from an over-representation of the more affluent groups of society. Were the *Digest* poll held right now, Gallup claimed, its results would show a significant lead for the Republican candidate, Alf Landon (56 per cent to Roosevelt's 44 per cent), whereas Gallup's own polling organization showed that Roosevelt was marginally ahead in voters' preferences.²¹ The conflict thus created between newcomer and established market leader became a prominent feature of campaign news coverage in 1936, and arguably one of the most successful advertisement campaigns in the twentieth century. It was not the first time for the methodological approach of the *Literary Digest* poll to come under scrutiny – but this time there was a plausible alternative on offer with Gallup's American Institute of Public Opinion, which presented itself consistently as 'scientific' and novel in approach. The *Washington Post* and Gallup produced further attention by launching a competition which called on participants to predict the election outcome themselves, and to describe shortly the method or material used for their prediction.²² The conflict over the 'right' polling method attracted a lot of media attention, not least because throughout the campaign period the *Literary Digest* and Gallup's AIPO consistently disagreed on which of the two candidates was in the lead. Hence media commentators could present the election results not just as the decision in a political race, but also as one between two media 'rivals'.²³

19 M. Copeland, Degrees of Brand Recognition, in: F. E. Clark (ed.), *Readings in Marketing*, New York 1931, 178–180; D. B. Lucas/C. E. Benson, Some sales results for positive and negative advertisements, in: *Journal of Applied Psychology* 14 (1930) 4, 363–370.

20 D. J. Robinson, Measure of Democracy (Fn 18), 41–43.

21 *Washington Post*, 21 July 1936: Result Today Point to Close November Race, B1–2.

22 'The *Washington Post*'s 1936 America Speaks Presidential Poll Contest \$1,000' was first announced in *Washington Post*, 11 September 1936, X1, X10; and competition details were provided in *Washington Post*, 13 September 1936, B9. Until the election, the *Washington Post* published almost daily adverts for this competition which attracted more than 2,000 entries; results were announced in *Washington Post*, 15 November 1936: GAO Auditor Wins The *Post*'s Election Award, M1–2.

23 E.g. *Washington Post*, 14 September 1936: Straw Votes on Presidential Forecast Show Varying Results in 3 Polls,

Thus Roosevelt's landslide victory of 1936 also signified the victory of George Gallup and the 'new' method of 'scientific polling'.²⁴ Even those media which had so far refrained from covering the polling results of Gallup's AIPO now had to make references to its accurate election prediction when reporting on the spectacular failure of the Literary Digest poll. Gallup now became the subject of multiple press features, and gained a highly prestigious new subscriber to his syndicated columns with the New York Times which added significant symbolic capital to his name.²⁵ Market researchers were delighted with the attention Gallup thus produced for their quantitative method, and apparently registered a strong increase in customer interest within a few days of the election.²⁶ In the following months and years Gallup used the newly-won public attention to popularize his name and his institute's polling method. He undertook public speaking engagements and wrote numerous popular and scholarly articles on the representative sample survey of public opinion, in which the dramatic breakthrough story and the Literary Digest failure of 1936 featured prominently.²⁷

2. Internationalization

One of the many fascinated consumers of this dramatic narrative was Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, a German exchange student who spent a year at the School of Journalism in Columbia, Missouri, in the academic year 1937/38. As a consequence, she abandoned her earlier Ph.D. research topic, and upon her return to Nazi Germany wrote a dissertation entitled 'American Mass Surveys in Politics and the Press'.²⁸ She went on to become the Grand Old Dame of public opinion polling in the Federal Republic of Germany, and in her memoirs (published in 2006) she devoted a lengthy section to re-narrating the foundational story of Gallup's breakthrough.²⁹ At an international conference in 1955, she met the famous pollster personally for the first time, and a photo of this encoun-

X2; Washington Post, 4 October 1936: How Correct Will Poll Be On Nov. 3d?, B1; Washington Post, 25 October 1936: AIPO Estimate Close to Final Digest Figure, B1; Washington Post, 1 November 1936: Voting Tuesday to Test Clashing Poll Methods, B1.

24 Washington Post, 8 November 1936: Institute Poll Most Accurate Forecast of Great Roosevelt Landslide, B1; New York Times, 5 November 1936: Accuracy of Gallup Poll, Carried in The Post, Stirs Comment of Political, Business Leaders, X1.

25 For a list of early press features on Gallup, see Robinson, *Measure of Democracy* (Fn 18), 180, Fn. 24. The New York Times started running articles under Gallup's name from February 1938.

26 New York Times, 5 November 1936: Advertising News and Notes, 50; New York Times, 8 November 1936: Straw Polls Help Market Research, F9.

27 E.g. G. Gallup, *Polling Public Opinion: The Director of the Nation's Leading Public Poll Explains Its Functions and Defends It from Critics*, in: *Current History* 51 (1940) 6, 23-26, 57. For other publications by Gallup, see Robinson, *Measure of Democracy* (Fn 18), 45, 180-181, Fn. 26. Significantly, in his self-presentation to an international (expert) public, Gallup localized his beginnings explicitly in 1936, as evident in his talk at the World Association of Public Opinion Research conference in Paris, 7 September 1949, entitled 'Polling Experiences, 1936-1948', published as G. Gallup, *Mes expériences de sondages de 1936 à 1948*, in: *Psyché* 4 (1949), 34.

28 E. Noelle, *Amerikanische Massenbefragungen für Politik und Presse*, Berlin 1940. See also C. Domnitz, *Nazi oder Karrierist? Über die wissenschaftliche und publizistische Tätigkeit Elisabeth Noelle-Neumanns im Dritten Reich*, Berlin 2005, online @ <http://amor.cms.hu-berlin.de/~h0444vhn/noeneut.pdf>, last accessed 10 May 2011.

29 E. Noelle-Neumann, *Die Erinnerungen*, Munich 2006, 60-64, 82-83.

ter gives us a glimpse of the attention which Gallup was able to enjoy at this moment in time. It is reproduced in Noelle-Neumann's memoirs, and thus constitutes a visual marker which directs the attention of the reader towards Noelle-Neumann's connection to the foundation myth of her discipline. The caption describes Gallup as 'the founder of the method of representative surveys'. In this, Noelle-Neumann followed the media tenor of US journalists of the late 1930s, and the tradition of commercial pollsters to the present day.

Gallup caught the attention not only of young exchange student Elisabeth Noelle. In Britain, too, media makers encountered the story of the 1936 election – not least because most foreign correspondents were used to reading the *Washington Post*, and therefore Gallup's columns.³⁰ The world's second-largest media market was an obvious area for expansion for Gallup, and already in 1936 one of his employees recruited assistants for a team in London with whom Gallup founded the British Institute of Public Opinion (BIPO) in 1937. For Gallup, the British subsidiary had several advantages: first of all, international expansion demonstrated market acceptance of his method and thereby strengthened trust in Gallup as a brand. Furthermore, British opinions on foreign policy topics were a marketable commodity in the US too, not least because of Hitler's aggressive expansionism. In fact, it was only after the Sudeten Crisis of September 1938 that the British Gallup branch entered public consciousness, because it was only now that the leading liberal newspaper, the *News Chronicle*, signed a contract with BIPO and started publishing the results of opinion surveys which it commissioned. The newspaper was a harsh critic of Chamberlain's appeasement policy; it was therefore no coincidence that the first published opinion survey – a few weeks after the dramatic days of Munich – measured the popularity of Chamberlain and public trust in the sustainability of the peace allegedly saved by him.³¹ In public statements, the newspaper's editor emphasized the fact that the brand 'Gallup' guaranteed the reliability of the survey results. As he wrote in a letter-to-the-editors at *The Times*: 'the British and American Institutes being, in effect, two branches of one body, both under the direct control of Dr. George Gallup, their founder'.³²

In France, too, the 'brand' Gallup caught contemporaries' attention, and played a decisive role in the early establishment of political opinion polling, as shown by Loïc Blondiaux.³³ The French journalist Alfred Max and the sociologist Jean Stoetzel met Gallup during a scholarship study trip to the US in 1938, and were encouraged and supported

30 E.g. *The Economist*, 25 July 1936: *A Close Race in America?*, 158–159.

31 For Henry Durant and the foundation of BIPO see R. M. Worcester, *British Public Opinion. A Guide to the History and Methodology of Political Opinion Polling*, Oxford 1991, 5; for Harry Field, see G. M. Conelly, Harry Hubert Field, in: *International Journal of Opinion and Attitude Research* 1 (1947) 1, 93–5. For the politics of *News Chronicle*, see L. Beers, *Whose Opinion? Changing Attitudes towards opinion polling in British politics, 1937–1964*, in: *Twentieth Century British History* 17 (2006) 2, 177–205. In August 1938, BIPO is not yet mentioned in an article featuring Gallup and representative opinion polling, see *The Economist*, 27 August 1938: *Public Opinion By Sample*, 401–2.

32 *The Times*, 3 May 1939: *Opinion-measurement. To the Editor of The Times*, 10.

33 Blondiaux, *Fabrique de l'opinion* (Fn 1), 290–324.

in their foundation of the Institut Français d'Opinion Publique (IFOP) the following year, in 1939.³⁴ The similarity in name with the American original and its British subsidiary was no coincidence, but economic necessity: not the survey method as such convinced the first client, but Gallup's reputation. During a trip to Europe in 1939, Gallup personally helped IFOP gain a contract with the *Paris Soir*, the newspaper with the highest circulation of any daily in France, which in design and journalistic practice followed the lead of American and British press products.³⁵ In July 1939, the first published French opinion survey, which drew on the results of the three organizations and which quantified (among other things) the popularity of various statesmen including Hitler and Mussolini, was announced on the front-page of *Paris Soir* as the first 'Gallup referendum' in France – and naturally the newspaper also pointed to Gallup's success in 1936 in accurately measuring American public sentiment.³⁶

During his trip to Europe in 1939 Gallup was also in Berlin, where he was hoping to establish a German Institute – a plan apparently abandoned after the German attack on Poland.³⁷ He was more successful in Denmark where he made contact with the Danish advertising professional, Haagen Wahl Asmussen, who went on to organize the Dansk Gallup Institut in 1939, and the Svenska Gallup Institutet (in Sweden) in October 1941.³⁸ The year 1941 also saw the foundation of the Australian Public Opinion Polls and of the Canadian Institute of Public Opinion, and one year later a Brazilian polling organization followed (1942: Instituto Brasileiro de Opinião Pública e Estatística, affiliated in 1946).³⁹ Shortly after the end of the Second World War institutes were established in the Netherlands (Nederlandsch Instituut voor de Publieke Opinie, founded in 1945, affiliated in February 1947), Finland (1945: Suomen Gallup Oy), and Norway (1945: Norsk Gallup Institutt).⁴⁰ In May 1947, representatives of the various Gallup institutes met for a first international conference in Loxwood Hall, Sussex, and founded the 'International Association of Public Opinion (Gallup) Institutes', with members

34 One of Gallup's employees, Harry Field, helped set up the institute in 1939, see Connelly, Harry Hubert Field (Fn 31), 93.

35 Blondiaux, Fabrique de l'Opinion (Fn 1), 301; for *Paris Soir*, see 'Paris-Soir, la révolution de l'image', online @ <http://presse-paris.univ-paris1.fr/spip.php?article48>, last accessed 22 February 2011.

36 Blondiaux, Fabrique de l'Opinion (Fn 1), 301-3, 320.

37 S. Holmberg, Election studies the Swedish way, in: European Journal of Political Research, 25 (1994) 3, 309.

38 Ibid., 309; E. Håstad, "Gallup" och den svenska väljarkåren. Några studier om opinionsmätningar, Uppsala 1950; G. Gallup, Reporting Public Opinion in Five Nations, in: Public Opinion Quarterly 6 (1942) 3, 436.

39 For Australia, see G. Gallup, Reporting Public Opinion in Five Nations (Fn 38), 435; S. Mills, Polling, politics and the press 1941–1996, in: A. Curthoys/J. Schultz (eds), Journalism: print, politics and popular culture, St Lucia 1999, 205. For Canada, see the report by Wilfred Sanders in G. Gallup, Reporting Public Opinion in Five Nations (Fn 38), 433–435; and D. J. Robinson, Measure of Democracy (Fn 18), 66. For Brazil, see account of Auricelio Penteadó's training with Gallup in 1942, <http://ibope.co.tv>, last accessed 1 June 2011; official affiliation with AIPO only happened in September 1946, see Public Opinion Quarterly 10 (1946) 3: Brazilian Gallup Poll, 444.

40 For the dates, see Washington Post, 6 February 1947: Holland Becomes 10th Nation To Organize a Gallup Poll, 11. In the case of Norsk Gallup, secondary literature on Norwegian polling usually gives 1946 as foundation date which may well be more accurate: see Y. Ustvedt, Den varme Freden – den kalde krig, Gyldendal 1978, 130; J. Geer (ed.), Public opinion and polling around the world: a historical encyclopedia. Volume 1, Oxford 2004, 677.

from eleven countries.⁴¹ A few months later, the World Congress for Public Opinion Research (later to become the World Association of Public Opinion Research, or WAPOR) was voted into existence during the founding conference of the American Association for Public Opinion Research in Williamstown, Massachusetts, during a session chaired by Gallup.⁴² Throughout the rest of the 1940s and 1950s, representatives of the various Gallup organizations were regularly voted into leading positions of WAPOR.

3. Market dynamics

The establishment of these early Gallup institutes in their various markets always followed the same pattern: market researchers used their methodology of representative quota sampling to produce survey results with news value, and media enterprises hoped to attract reader attention by offering these news.⁴³ The *News Chronicle* in Britain was not the only media enterprise beginning to take an interest in the new product when realizing that it could produce new and additional attention for a particular political topic (in this case Appeasement), in which the publishing company had already invested significantly employing other journalistic techniques; the same was true in the case of Canada and Australia.⁴⁴ But it was election surveys which offered by far the greatest attention value and were consequently given the greatest media exposure, not least because of the media logic of ‘horse-race reporting’ in the run up to any election, and because of the implicit verification of the trustworthiness of opinion surveys through each election.⁴⁵ This hierarchical order of attention (or news) values for a range of different societal issues also determined the definition of the surveyed population, the statistical ‘universe’ for which quota samples were constructed. The collective of individuals surveyed by Gallup organizations in the 1930s and 1940s was that of voters, a ‘miniature electorate’ as Gallup put it himself in his book *The Pulse of Democracy* in 1940.⁴⁶ In fact, it was not even the collective of eligible voters in any given country but more narrowly that of actual voters (as defined by statistical analyses of past elections) or – more problematic still – the group of individuals considered most likely to vote in the next election. This constructed entity became the ‘gold standard’ in the market of public opinion polling.⁴⁷

41 Public Opinion Quarterly 11 (1947) 2: Gallup Institutes confer in England, 319–320.

42 P. B. Sheatsley, The Founding of AAPOR, in: P. B. Sheatsley/W. J. Mitofsky (eds), *A Meeting Place. The History of The American Association for Public Opinion Research*, Ann Arbor 1992, 49.

43 Only in the case of the Canadian CIPO it was not Canadian market researchers but American AIPO personnel which was entrusted with the management of the organization, see D. J. Robinson, *Measure of Democracy* (Fn 18), 67–68.

44 Ibid., 35–37; M. Goot, “A worse importation than chewing gum”: American Influences on The Australian Press and Their Limits – The Australian Gallup Poll, 1941–1973, in: *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 30 (2010) 3, 279.

45 When commenting on the accuracy of Gallup’s election predictions, one Canadian journalist rather tellingly explained it through solid grounding in ‘research and horse-sense’, quoted in D. J. Robinson, *Measure of Democracy* (Fn 18), 65.

46 G. Gallup, S. F. Rae, *The Pulse of Democracy. The Public Opinion Poll and How It Works*, New York 1940, 56.

47 Igo describes elections as pollsters’ ‘litmus test’ and the focus on elections as the ‘gold standard for corporate

The media and economic logic which underpinned the definition of the surveyed 'universe' also explains the existence of Gallup's 'blind spots', of societal groups either completely ignored or crudely under-represented: black Americans (who were not eligible to vote in the south of the US), Native Americans in the US or Canada, Aborigines in Australia, young people under the age of 21, individuals at the bottom of the economic ladder (the so-called 'C2DE' groups of market research), women, or foreigners.⁴⁸ The implicit cultural assumptions and the economic and political power structures underlying the statistical construction of the observed 'universe' were seldom made as explicit as in the announcement by Gallup to an expert public in autumn 1946 that his organization had just gained a new affiliate, in Brazil: 'For the present the Brazilian Institute confines its opinion polling to Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, those cities comprising a large proportion of the literate and politically articulate population of Brazil. The Institute plans gradually to extend its polling operations to other parts of the country. Approximately 30,000,000 of Brazil's 45,000,000 population belong to rural sections subject to the lowest standards of life in the world. Most of them are illiterate. Because of this special situation, it appears that the proposed cross-section is a reasonably sound cross-section of the voting population.'⁴⁹

Put differently: pollsters' decision – taken at the outset of the surveying process – not to consider certain population groups as (politically) significant variables in the measurement of opinion meant that these groups were not made 'visible', and that their potentially specific political views were not given a voice. In the process of surveying mass attention to create a product for a predominantly white mass media public, a significant part of society was simply statistically 'swallowed' and thereby silenced.⁵⁰ It is no coincidence that the Civil Rights movement in the US only became visible to a mass media public through planned protest movements from the late 1950s onwards: in terms of public opinion surveys the movement had no history.⁵¹ This is not to suggest that commercial opinion pollsters used these blind spots to suit a specific political agenda. Quite on the contrary, in view of their dependence on the mass media for the communication of their results, and the contemporary belief in strong media effects, as well as public sensitivity to propaganda (heightened by the perception of media and propaganda abuse by the Nazis), pollsters avoided anything that could strengthen the position of those critics who accused opinion polling generally as an exercise in public manipulation.⁵² Public

clients'; see S. E. Igo, *The Averaged American. Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of a Mass Public*, Cambridge Massachusetts 2007, 135. See also D. J. Robinson, *Measure of Democracy* (Fn 18), 50.

48 M. Goot/T. Rowse, *Divided nation? Indigenous affairs and the imagined public*, Melbourne 2007; D. J. Robinson, *Measure of Democracy* (Fn 18), 51, 54, 56-57; S. E. Igo, *Averaged American* (Fn 47), 135-139. For an early statistical critique of the samples used, see D. Rugg, *How Representative are 'Representative Samples'?*, in: H. Cantril (ed.), *Gauging Public Opinion*, Princeton 1944, 142-149.

49 *Public Opinion Quarterly* 10 (1946) 3: Brazilian Gallup Poll, 444.

50 S. E. Igo, *Averaged American* (Fn 47), 142.

51 T. Lee, *Mobilizing Public Opinion. Black Insurgency and Racial Attitudes in the Civil Rights Era*, Chicago 2002, 85-89.

52 For pollsters' positioning in 'a treacherous cultural field'; see S. E. Igo, *Averaged American* (Fn 47), 124. Goot

trust in opinion polling built up after 1936 was not to be put at risk carelessly by being seen to promote particularist interests, or interest groups. Tellingly, trust in opinion polling was measured very pragmatically in terms of numbers of (media) customers for pollsters' products, and not by surveying the population's views on opinion polling.

It would be wrong to assume that early practitioners of opinion polling were blissfully ignorant of methodological problems associated with the practice of surveying public opinion – but they were mostly concerned with problems for which there was a quick-fix solution. Again and again, they pointed out that tendential or confusing questions which could seriously affect the results of any survey could be weeded out by thorough ('scientific') pre-testing of questionnaires, and they reminded the wider public and each other of their own position as 'non-partisan' observers who could be trusted to devise a battery of value-free questions for interviewers.⁵³ Indeed, pre-testing questionnaires became an important ritual within polling practice.⁵⁴ However, findings by academic survey researchers which showed that differences in social background between interviewer and interviewee had a strong impact on the kind of answers received were significantly more difficult to integrate into a low-cost production of survey results, and were therefore largely ignored by practitioners.⁵⁵ Similarly, the method of representative quota sampling quickly came under fire from statisticians who pointed out that random sampling would yield significantly more representative results. But early experiments by commercial polling organisations showed that there were considerable practical problems in the implementation of random sampling; quota sampling also had the added advantage of being significantly cheaper.⁵⁶ While issues such as question wording, question order, and sampling method were regularly discussed at conferences and within expert publications (like the *Public Opinion Quarterly*, founded in 1937), there was precious little engagement with the question of why certain topics or issues hardly ever featured on questionnaires, despite the almost ritualistic claims for the democratic potential of the new surveying technique: race relations, ethnic minorities, anti-Semitism, big business, and social inequality were just a few of the topics of a potentially incendiary political

observed that APOP never published sample sizes and margins of error – 'anything that cast doubt on the reliability of a finding'; see Goot, *Australian Gallup Poll* (Fn 44), 279.

53 For early critical engagement with question wording, see D. Rugg, H. Cantril, *The Wording of Questions*, in H. Cantril (ed.), *Gauging Public Opinion* (Fn 48), 23–50, and H. Cantril, E. Fried, *The Meaning of Questions*, in: *ibid*, 3–22.

54 It still is, and practitioners continue to struggle to make sense of its relevance, see S. Presser et al., *Methods for testing and evaluating survey questions*, in: *Public Opinion Quarterly* 68 (2011) 1, 109–130.

55 See Harold Gosnell's criticism of Gallup's book, *Pulse of Democracy*, published in 1940, in: *Public Opinion Quarterly* 5 (1941) 2, 342; S. E. Igo, *Averaged American* (Fn 47), 130–131; for Franco-Canadians see D. J. Robinson, *Measure of Democracy* (Fn 18), 89. Cantril's *Gauging Public Opinion* from 1944 is a good collection of early methodological critiques: for an analysis J. M. Converse, *Survey Research* (Fn 17), 214–217.

56 For practical problems, see S. E. Igo, *Averaged American* (Fn 47), 131–134; for 'budget limitations' favouring quota sampling, see W. Sanders, *A Note on the Public Relations of Election Forecasts*, in: *Public Opinion Quarterly* 13 (1949) 3, 511–513. In the early 1950s, the American social scientist Samuel Stouffer claimed that probability sampling cost up to five times more than quota sampling, see S. Stouffer, *Communism, conformity and civil liberties: a cross-section of the nation speaks its mind*, New Brunswick 1992 [1955], 16. See also J. M. Converse, *Survey Research* (Fn 17), 209, 211, 231.

nature which clearly were not to the taste of mass media producers who were funding opinion surveys.⁵⁷ Rather tellingly, the Association of Canadian Newspaper Publishers decided after lengthy deliberations not to commission the Canadian Institute of Public Opinion (CIPO) to conduct a survey on the public reputation of the Canadian press in the mid-1940s.⁵⁸

There is another significant blind spot of public opinion polling in this period: namely opinion polling itself. There was only one representative opinion survey which questioned Americans on their views on opinion polling in this period. This survey took place in the wake of the presidential election of 1944, in which Gallup's AIPO had correctly predicted Roosevelt's victory but for the third consecutive time had underforecast the number of Democratic voters. Democrats were incensed and suspected partisan tampering; in the *New York Herald Tribune* Walter Lippmann denounced what he called a 'Gallup Poll democracy'.⁵⁹ Gallup was subsequently called to appear before an investigation committee in Congress to defend himself against accusations of manipulation.⁶⁰ Shortly before Gallup's appearance in the House, at the height of public criticism, colleagues at the Princeton Office of Public Opinion Research published a survey on public awareness of polls, public confidence in the accuracy of polling results, and public trust in the honesty of pollsters.⁶¹ Asked whether they had ever heard of a public opinion poll, 56% of individuals surveyed answered 'Yes': but half of these respondents aware of the existence of opinion polls claimed not to pay any attention to published polling results and another third stated that they read them only 'occasionally'. These findings did not deter pollsters from concluding by way of tendential questions that public trust in opinion surveys was in good health: 'A majority of the American people know about the polls, believe them generally a good thing, and trust their reports. This is a striking vote of confidence for a social technique barely entering its second decade', read the conclusion of the article reporting the finding of the survey in the scholarly journal *Public Opinion Quarterly*.⁶² Not surprisingly, this opinion had a news value for those mass media subscribing to Gallup's services, and therefore was relayed to a mass readership.⁶³ Interestingly, such a survey was not repeated in 1948, although it would have been very

57 For a rare exception see A. Kornhauser, Are Public Opinion Polls Fair to Organized Labor?, in: *Public Opinion Quarterly* 10 (1946) 4, 485-500, which provoked contributions by Henry C. Link, Albert D. Freiberg, John H. Platten, and Kenneth E. Clark, summarized under the title 'Is Dr. Kornhauser Fair to Organized Pollers?', in: *Public Opinion Quarterly* 11 (1947) 2, 198-212.

58 D. J. Robinson, *Measure of Democracy* (Fn 18), 92.

59 Walter Lippmann, in *New York Herald Tribune*, 2 December 1944, quoted in E. F. Goldman, Poll on the Polls, in: *Public Opinion Quarterly* 8 (1944) 4, 461-468, here 462.

60 D. J. Robinson, *Measure of Democracy* (Fn 18), 61; J. M. Converse, *Survey Research* (Fn 17), 207-211.

61 E. F. Goldman, Poll on the Polls (Fn 59).

62 *Ibid.*, 467. The article contained no information regarding method and size of the sample, and did not discuss whether results would have been different if questions had been posed slightly differently. It also did not report all questions asked; several were withheld. Survey questionnaire and documentation is available as dataset USOPOR1944-034 at the Roper Center Public Opinion Archives, www.ropercenter.uconn.edu, last accessed 20 February 2011.

63 *Washington Post*, 15 February 1945: America at War. The Public On Opinion Polling, 7.

topical, again due to an American presidential election. By now, as far as media commentators were concerned Gallup was the personification of opinion polling. In May 1948, his face graced the front cover of *Time* magazine, carrying the caption ‘For an election year, a political slide rule’; the feature described him as a ‘household name’.⁶⁴ As the presenter of a weekly survey TV show broadcast by CBS, Gallup entered the living rooms of almost ten million television owners in the run-up to the election.⁶⁵ In short, media attention lavished on Gallup at this point had reached a new quality. Gallup’s AIPO – like other commercial polling organizations – confidently predicted the victory of the Republican candidate Thomas Dewey. However, the winner was eventually Harry Truman. The photo of Truman, laughing and holding up a copy of the pro-Republican *Chicago Tribune* which had already announced his defeat as front-page news on the morning after election night, has subsequently become one of the icons of American historical narratives of the twentieth century. In the context of this article it can be seen as a visualization of what Sarah Igo has called the persistent epistemological instability of political opinion polling.⁶⁶

In view of Gallup’s media presence his ‘drop height’ in 1948 was considerable, and the media, political and scholarly attention devoted to the forecasting disaster was correspondingly intense. The Social Science Research Council immediately established an investigation committee which concluded that there was no evidence of bad faith but ‘much evidence of bad judgment’.⁶⁷ Gallup and other commercial pollsters, the social science experts proclaimed, had been overly influenced by commercial concerns and had been obeying ‘journalistic rather than scientific demands’.⁶⁸ However, the published report paid no attention to the question of the extent to which this polling debacle had diminished media consumers’ trust in the practice of public opinion polling. This does not mean that there was no scholarly interest in the consequences of the 1948 forecasting disaster. In 1949, Paul Lazarsfeld’s Bureau of Applied Social Research in New York organized a survey on this topic which, however, was not designed as a representative survey but as one which focussed on a particular, ‘strategic’ population group: namely that of American media producers.⁶⁹ The definition of this survey’s universe was the result of the specific attention focus of the Lazarsfeld group which was primarily interested in the social and communicative process of political opinion formation in the wake of Lazarsfeld’s ‘discovery’ of the concepts of a ‘two-step flow of communication’ and the existence of ‘opinion leaders’ in the early 1940s.⁷⁰ This interest was also reflected in the

64 *Time*, 3 May 1948: The Black and White Beans, 21.

65 J. von Schilling, *The magic window: American television, 1939–1953*, New York 2003, 110–111.

66 S. E. Igo, *Averaged American* (Fn 47), 188.

67 *Washington Post*, 27 December 1948: No Bad Faith Found in Poll Failure Study, 1.

68 F. Mosteller et al., *The Pre-Election Polls of 1948. Report to the Committee on Analysis of Pre-Election Polls and Forecasts*, New York 1949, 53.

69 R. K. Merton, P. K. Hatt, *Election Polling Forecasts and Public Images of Social Sciences. A Case Study in the Shaping of Opinion Among a Strategic Public*, in: *Public Opinion Quarterly* 13 (1949) 2, 185–222.

70 P. F. Lazarsfeld, B. Berelson, H. Gaudet, *The people’s choice: how the voter makes up his mind in a presidential campaign*, New York 1944, 151–152.

method chosen: rather than using oral interviews, the social scientists mailed out questionnaires containing exclusively open questions. Open questions – i.e. questions that do not force respondents to choose between pre-determined answers (mostly Yes, No, or Don't Know) – were then hardly ever used by commercial opinion pollsters because they were (and still are) considered 'almost useless for statistical processing', as one of the standard textbooks on opinion polling claimed.⁷¹ Indeed, the article which resulted from the survey conducted by the Bureau of Applied Social Research exemplified the fact that a qualitative analysis of surveyed opinions was difficult to represent in a concise and unambiguous – and thereby mass media-compatible – fashion. But one of the observations made by researchers in 1949 was highly significant, as well as paradoxical: many of those editors responding to the questionnaire explained their decision regarding the future of opinion polling in their papers – those who had decided to continue subscribing to polling organizations' syndicated articles, as well as those who had cancelled their subscription – with reference to continuing – or vanishing – readers' interest in opinion polls' results.⁷² In other words, the *raison d'être* of public opinion polls as far as American editors were concerned was the existence of market demand for survey results.

In fact, the media market quickly forgave opinion pollsters their mishap of 1948, for a variety of reasons. Unlike in 1936, there was no obvious alternative on offer. Also, Gallup and other commercial pollsters seized the opportunity to present a technical quick-fix by changing slightly the method of surveying.⁷³ More importantly still, subsequent elections saw a sequence of 'accurate' predictions which soon re-established trust in the reliability of pollsters' findings, and Gallup's foreign associates played a crucial role in this. As Wilfrid Sanders, the head of the Canadian Institute of Public Opinion announced after the accurate forecast of the Canadian parliamentary election in 1949, their task had not simply been to get the right winner: '[W]e saw our task as that of demonstrating, out loud, that we had learned something from the Truman victory and the resultant post mortem, and that we were not simply going ahead with the same old tools, trusting that they would work better this time.'⁷⁴ Finally, in those markets where opinion polling had already become an integral part of journalistic practice this particular serial form of societal self-description had created a demand which continued to require servicing.⁷⁵ One member of the public wrote to one of Gallup's competitors in 1952: 'I do not believe that you should – or that you can – withdraw from the field of published political research. The demand would still exist, and the gap you would leave would be filled by someone else.'⁷⁶ This was a reasonable assumption – but one that was never empirically

71 See E. Noelle-Neumann, *Umfragen in der Massengesellschaft. Einführung in die Methoden der Demoskopie*, Reinbek bei Hamburg 1963, 88.

72 R. K. Merton, P. K. Hatt, *Election Polling Forecasts* (Fn 69), 197-199.

73 G. Gallup, *The Gallup Poll and the 1950 Election*, in: *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 15 (1951) 1, 16-22.

74 W. Sanders, *A Note on the Public Relations of Election Forecasts*, in: *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 13 (1949) 3, 511-513, here 511.

75 See *Time*, 6 October 1952: *Back at the Old Stand*.

76 Quoted in S. E. Igo, *Averaged American* (Fn 47), 189.

tested: not a single market research study in this period surveyed readers' attention for published opinion polls.⁷⁷

Conclusion

The discussion about the appropriate conclusions to be drawn from the 1948 polling disaster was soon limited to the sphere of an expert public. The attention structures of this expert public, however, is a topic in its own right. In this sphere there were no obvious market-, opinion-, or attention-leader; rather, there existed – side-by-side, sometimes cooperating, sometimes in conflict – various communities of university-based empirical social researchers as well as commercial market and opinion researchers, a burgeoning field of behavioural scientists influencing communication research and political sciences, which resulted in controversial discussions about research designs: in short, a polyphony of experts' voices which tried in different ways to attract attention to their particular method of surveying and measuring political opinion and opinion formation. Of course, in these often overlapping fields within the social sciences there were also market cycles which affected researchers' attention, as evident in the publications in various expert journals within different disciplines and in various language areas which in turn directed the attention of other researchers and practitioners to particular issues. These market cycles were influenced by state and international organizations (especially UNESCO), but also private foundations (like Rockefeller, Ford, and Carnegie) as well as commercial organizations which acted as funding bodies, and thereby enabled particular research projects to be initiated, rolled out, or sustained.⁷⁸

Much recent research which can be subsumed under Lutz Raphael's notion of the 'scientization of the social' has shed light on the numerous processes through which applied social sciences have classified social phenomena, have defined social 'problems', and have provided advice for decisions-makers.⁷⁹ And yet much more research is needed into the public 'visibility' of the social sciences within twentieth-century societies. How and in what media context did lay audiences encounter these scientific self-descriptions of society, and to what extent did they accept or reject categories on offer? Indeed, how did communicative settings change the notion of scientists and experts? As Gangolf Hübinger recently commented, many social scientists intervening in public debate in the twentieth century found themselves labelled and transformed into 'intellectuals' within a mass media public.⁸⁰ Conversely, commercial pollsters were gradually crowded out of academic

77 At least no such study seems to have been published.

78 For the case of American survey research, see J. M. Converse, *Survey Research* (Fn 17), 239-415; for the dominance of the Michigan school within electoral research, see G. Pomper, *Voters, Elections and Parties: The Practice of Democratic Theory*, New Brunswick 1988, chpt. 7.

79 L. Raphael, *Die Verwissenschaftlichung des Sozialen als methodische und konzeptionelle Herausforderung für eine Sozialgeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts*, in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 22 (1996), 165-193.

80 Observation made in his commentary at the section 'Die antidemokratische Mentalität im Blickfeld der kritischen Theorie – ein transatlantischer Transfer in den Sozialwissenschaften zwischen Emigration und Remigra-

publications, and the ‘scientific’ nature of their approach was increasingly questioned by university-based experts who decried both the lack of transparency and the absence of epistemological reflections. But within the context of democratic mass media societies, commercial public opinion polling attracted the most attention, and its products – published opinion polls – arguably transformed conceptions as to what ‘public opinion’ was taken to mean in the second half of the twentieth century.⁸¹ A transnational history of the marketing and presentation of opinion polls is yet to be written, but it promises to be a fruitful area of research.

tion’, 48. Deutscher Historikertag, Berlin 2010. For a survey of the changing uses made of the label ‘intellectual’, see D. Bering, *Die Epoche der Intellektuellen 1898–2001. Geburt, Begriff, Grabmal*, Berlin 2010.

81 P. E. Converse, *Changing Conceptions of Public Opinion in the Political Process*, in: *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 51 (1987), 50th Anniversary Issue, 12–13; A. E. Gollin, *Polling and the News Media*, in: *ibid.*, 586.