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Reporting on polls? Here's how to do it responsibly

FRANK O. SOTOMAYOR, POYNTER

Improving the quality of coverage isn't rocket science if you know a few essentials

On the morning after the 2016 presidential election, many opinion pollsters and pundits picked at their scrambled eggs with egg on their faces. Somehow, Donald Trump had upset Hillary Clinton, the favored candidate in their polls. Journalists who provided misleading reporting to the public should have been eating humble pie.

Before this year's Nov. 3 elections, we'll be inundated again with polls and punditry. With national and state polls proliferating, we risk drowning in bad data, said Tom Rosenstiel, executive director of the American Press Institute.

Journalists shouldn't make matters worse by superficial and careless reporting. Improving the

quality of coverage isn't rocket science if you know a few essentials.

Let's start here: Journos should make clear that all opinion polls come with tricky challenges and a margin of error. Getting accurate poll data this year is being complicated by the pandemic, widespread mail-in voting, hyper-polarized constituencies and daily news surprises.

Many in the news media compound the situation by misleading reporting. Too many reports, for example, ignore that each poll carries a margin of error—or explain what that means. Adding fine print at the bottom of a graphic doesn't cut it.

Here's how it works: Say a reputable polling firm—call it Company A—surveys 1,000 people and finds that 55% of respondents oppose reopening schools. The company says the poll's margin of sampling error is plus or minus 3 percentage points. According to

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the American Association for Public Opinion Research and other experts, a correctly calculated margin of error means that Company A would get the same results — plus or minus 3 percentage points — 95 times if it repeated the poll 100 times. Thus, factoring in the margin of error, the poll's results would fall somewhere between 52% and 58%. (The size of the stated margin of error depends on the number of poll respondents and other factors.)

It's instructive to go back to 2016. On Election Eve, many polls favored Clinton at around 47% to 43%. The Bloomberg/Selzer poll, for example, had Clinton ahead 46%-43%. Factoring in that poll's margin of error of 3.5 percentage points, its results really showed Clinton could get as much as 49.5% of the vote, or as little as 42.5%. For Trump, he could receive anywhere from 39.5% to 46.5%.

Given those numbers, journalists should have reported the poll results "within the margin of error" and too close to call. That might not sound like a catchy headline, but it comes with that element of mystery—who'll win? — that attracts readers. And, most important, accuracy counts.

Some but not all newspapers did a better job of poll reporting. Television generally did not. Without mention of the margin of error, many viewers assumed Clinton was headed to certain victory.

As it turned out, Clinton won the popular vote 48% to 46%. That didn't matter, of course, because Trump prevailed in the Electoral College. And yes, journalists had failed to remind us that the Electoral College, not the popular vote, decides it all.

The stated margin of sampling error is just one source of potential miscalculation. A news report shouldn't turn off readers/viewers by venturing into the statistical weeds. And we won't go there now. But journos can inform the public that polls are an imprecise snapshot of people's view at a given time. If they mention that a result falls "within the margin of error," they can explain what that means. The American Association for Public Opinion Research offers guides on polling for journalists.

As a veteran newspaper editor, I come down hard on my news colleagues. The journalistic mission is not to spew out enticing headlines but to evaluate, skeptically, the accuracy and limitations of polls and to educate and inform the public. In 2016, most journalists failed.

Given this year's "super-challenging" polling environment, journalists can aid public understanding "by being more careful in phrasing of information" and exercising caution in projecting winners, said Angie Holan, editor-in-chief of PolitiFact, the Poynter Institute's increasingly vital fact-checking website.

A few researchers and journalists aggregate a large number of polls to develop statistically driven "probabilistic" forecasts. Nate Silver's "FiveThirtyEight" website, for example, gave Clinton a 71% chance of winning. The New York Times' "Upshot" predicted Clinton's chances of winning at 85%.

Social scientist Natalie Jackson, who botched the 2016 results by giving Clinton a 98% chance of winning, issued a mea culpa and wrote: "I have concluded that marketing (of) probabilistic poll-based forecasts to the general public is at best a disservice ... and at worst could impact voter turnout and outcomes."

Clinton told New York Magazine: "I don't know how we'll ever calculate how many people thought it was in the bag, because the percentages kept being thrown at people— Oh, she has an 88% chance to win."

My bottom line to journalists: Start covering polls responsibly.

Frank Sotomayor, a Los Angeles Times editor for 35 years, co-edited the 1983 series on Latinos that won the 1984 Pulitzer Prize for Public Service. He lives in Tucson and can be reached at news@poynter.org.

Visit <https://www.poynter.org/ethics-trust/2020/reporting-on-polls-heres-how-to-do-it-responsibly/> to read this story online.

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NEWS REPORTER. The Oskaloosa Herald is searching for a full-time news writer to join its award-winning staff. Our next reporter must be a self-starter with a passion for reporting important stories to our community. The Oskaloosa Herald offers a great opportunity for reporters to grow in a variety of subjects and mediums. This reporter will primarily report on Mahaska County and the city of Oskaloosa, writing about local government, business, education and people. Experience and degree preferred, but not required: We'll train the right person. To apply, send a cover letter describing qualifications for the position, a resume, and 3-4 writing samples to Kyle Ocker, Group Editor of the Oskaloosa Herald and Ottumwa Courier, by email at kocker@oskyherald.com.

PART-TIME ADVERTISING SALES REPRESENTATIVE. The Northwood Anchor and Manly Junction Signal, newspapers in Worth County, are seeking a part time advertising sales representative, with potential for other opportunities. We offer a job with a flexible schedule, working with a small team to support several local communities, their businesses and their newspapers. Questions or resumes may be emailed to kris@nwdanchor.com.

SPORTS EDITOR. The Spencer Daily Reporter, located at the entry to the Iowa Great Lakes, is looking for an energetic Sports Editor to join our award winning editorial department. The ideal individual will have strong writing and story telling skills, a nose for sports features, people skills, photography experience and be willing to be part of fun, dedicated team. Social media and video skills a plus. Individual will be writing previews, covering two local high school teams and one college team. Experience preferred but willing to consider the right candidate with a desire to grow in the job. Benefits include health and dental insurance, paid days off, holiday pay, 401K, flexible spending account. Please send cover letter, resume and any writing or photography samples to Randy Cauthron, Spencer Daily Reporter, PO Box 197, Spencer, IA 51301 or email: rcauthron@spencerdailyreporter.com.

▼ FOR SALE

NEW LISTING! For sale: Northwest Iowa weekly newspaper with supplement and printing shop. County legal plus legal for four towns. Newly remodeled brick/block building, equipment, large inventory included. Selling because of age/health. Phone 712/230/1405 or e-mail rouse@nethtc.net

Considering a sale of your newspaper but not sure where to start? Iowa's newest media broker, Scenic Trail Media Brokers, LLC, is here to help you. Scenic Trail Media Brokers will work with you in every step of the process to properly market your newspaper to help you attract the right buyer for your property. We'll work with you until the final closing to make sure you get top dollar. Call Ryan Harvey today at 515-689-1151 or reach him by email at scenictrailmediabrokers@gmail.com for more information.

Two weekly newspapers, including one in county seat community. Progressive communities. City, county, school legals. Located in southwest Iowa. Contact: Weekly Newspapers, Iowa Newspaper Association, 319 E. 5th St., Des Moines, Iowa.

Profitable group of three small weekly newspapers for sale in South Dakota, two in Black Hills. If interested write to: S.D. Newspapers c/o Iowa Newspaper Association, 319 E. 5th St., Des Moines, IA 50309.

IN NEED OF NEW LISTINGS. This could be the right time to sell! *Appraisals-Consultations-Brokerage services* Your full service broker, News Brokerage of Iowa, dtappnewsbrokerageofiowa@gmail.com, 319-350-2770.

Two Weekly Newspapers: Great opportunity for first-time owner or company seeking to expand to West Central Iowa. Can be purchased individually or as a pair. Great community support; city, county, school legals. Contact WCIA, Iowa Newspaper Association, 319 E. 5th St., Des Moines, Iowa.

County seat weeklies with top line revenues at \$1.4M. Over \$200k in cash flow. This listing won't last long. Please call today--Edward Anderson, Broker--National Media Associates--417-338-6397 or email: brokered1@gmail.com

Client looking to purchase a small weekly Iowa newspaper. Sellers contact Dave Tapp of News Brokerage of Iowa, dtappnewsbrokerageofiowa@gmail.com, 319-350-2770.

If you are considering a purchase, look no further! I have strong, profitable properties available across the state just waiting for owner operators or corporations. **Just listed:** Looking to be your own boss? Look no further! This small, profitable southern Iowa weekly is just waiting for you. Aggressively priced to move. **Just listed:** Rare opportunity to buy this profitable eastern Iowa weekly as current long-time owner ready to slow down. Located in a progressive community near larger communities. Perfect opportunity for an add-on to existing business or as a hands-on, stand alone business. **Motivated seller:** Small but mighty! Perennial award-winning eastern Iowa community weekly is now available. Aside from newspaper, the business has a strong social media and on-line presence. Book of digital printing business also available for extra cost. Perfect opportunity for an add-on to existing business or as a hands-on, stand alone business. **Retirement awaits:** Profitable northwest Iowa weekly newspaper available for sale with or without real estate. **Weekly newspaper group:** Owner looking to retire making this highly profitable, privately held group of Iowa weekly newspapers available for the first time in decades. The group features a strong staff with a centralized graphics department. Perfect add-on for a current group, or great opportunity for a hands-on owner. All inquiries to any property are strictly confidential. For more information contact: Ryan Harvey, Broker, Scenic Trail Media Brokers, LLC, at 515-689-1151 or by email at scenictrailmediabrokers@gmail.com

View and submit ads on the Internet at www.INAnews.com. Students and professionals may also submit their resumés for online viewing.

There is no charge for most of these ads. They are a free service to INA active (newspaper) members only. The name of the newspaper in the ad must be the same as published in the current INA Directory.

If you are trying to help an employee relocate, please send us the ad information on your letterhead, rather than having the employee write us. We will not run ads for persons living in a member's town without first clearing the ad with the publisher.

Please have copy to the INA office no later than noon on Monday. The INA will make the determination of whether an ad qualifies for free or paid publication. If payment for an ad is not enclosed with the ad, the INA will require payment in advance before the ad will be published.

Ads for products or services which could be marketed for a profit may be published for a fee of \$10 per insertion, paid in advance, with a 40-word maximum.

Recruitment (help wanted) ads for positions in states other than Iowa may be published for a fee of \$25 per insertion, with a 100-word maximum.

For more information, contact Cicely Gordon at cgordon@inaneews.com.



Iowa Newspaper Association

Bulletin

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IN THIS ISSUE...

- Using Data to Improve Your Journalism
- Live Streaming Video and Live Video

Media Briefing on Covering Election Night

On November 3rd, journalists covering national and local elections will be in uncharted terrain as they strive to interpret and accurately report early results in a landscape of unprecedented uncertainty. Anticipated ballot counting challenges and the infiltration of misinformation will make election-night reporting even more difficult than usual. Join us for an instructive briefing on best practices—and pitfalls to avoid—for reporters covering the 2020 elections. Hear insights from experts in political communication and polling, and tips from a veteran reporter with years of election coverage experience.

WHAT: SciLine Media Briefing: Covering Election Night: Uncertainty, Early Results, and Lessons from the Past, with an opportunity for Q&A

WHEN: Thursday, October 22, at 2:30 PM ET

WHO:

- Dr. Kathleen Hall Jamieson, University of Pennsylvania
- Dr. Lee Miringoff, Marist College Institute for Public Opinion
- Julie Pace, The Associated Press
- SciLine Director Rick Weiss will moderate the briefing.

Visit https://www.sciline.org/media-briefings-blog/voting-2020?utm_source=OptinResearch&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=voting to register online.

CONTEST TIMELINE

September 9 & 16, 2020 - Distribute 2021 Call for Entries in INA Bulletin

October 16, 2020 4:30pm - Contest entry deadline

November 2020 - Contest entries judged by MDCC Press Association members

December 2020 - Winners notified by INF

February 2021 - Winners announced during Convention Awards Banquet

Entries must have been published between **Oct. 1, 2019 and Sept. 30, 2020**, to be eligible.

Questions?

Contact INA/INF at 515-244-2145 or ina@inanews.com.



An Iowa Newspaper Foundation webinar...

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Friday, October 23 · 1-2 p.m.

Registration fee: FREE · Deadline: October 20

IN THIS WEBINAR...

All publishers want to become indispensable to their audiences. They want to know what drives engagement and subscriptions, how to make their work part of a reader's daily habit and how deeply to cover topics that matter. Those questions are not easily answered with conventional web analytics that were never intended for journalists. What people click on, spend time with, subscribe to and share can reveal why they rely on a publisher for their news and information. But data overload can become overwhelming, even paralyzing to decision making.

With insights from the American Press Institute's Metrics for News software and services, we will discuss which measures of engagement to focus on (hint: not just page views) and how to define success. Through a series of 11 lessons on using metrics for newsroom change (gathered from our work with 100+ newsroom partners), participants will learn how to prioritize which metrics to track and tips for leveraging the data-collection tool(s) they already use.

THE PRESENTER...

Katie Kutsko



Katie Kutsko is a graduate of the University of Kansas and the education & strategy manager for the American Press Institute's Metrics for News program. She empowers prospective and newly-signed partners to understand how MFN's suite of products can help them build a loyal and engaged audience over time. While at KU, she served as editor-in-chief at the University Daily Kansan, where she led a newsroom transformation from a print mindset to a digital-first operation. She has interned at the Chicago Tribune, Indianapolis Star and Lawrence (Kan.) Journal-World.

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Thursday, October 29 · 1-2 p.m.

Registration fee: FREE · Deadline: October 26

IN THIS WEBINAR...

Live streaming video is being used for breaking news, election programming, music and arts programming and more. Mobile apps like Facebook Live, IGTV, Periscope, Livestream and StreamYard make streaming live video easy and accessible. Learn to use the best apps, shoot the best video, get quality audio and how to interact with viewers during your broadcast.

THE PRESENTERS...

Val Hoepfner



Val Hoepfner is a digital journalist, training and media strategist. She has worked in digital, mobile and multi-platform journalism for more than 15 years. As CEO of Val Hoepfner Media and Consulting, LLC, Hoepfner travels to newsrooms, universities and media conferences where she creates and leads training for journalists in engagement, change management and developing digital and mobile workflow. Hoepfner is a member of the Native American Journalist Association, Online News Association, Association Press Photo Managers, American Society of News Editors, the Recording Academy and Public Radio in Mid America.

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