Public Opinion Polls in the News

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Organization of the presentation

- **Brief history of media polling**

- **Current trends in the news business**

- **New polling methods and their use in the media**

- **Two case studies to learn more about current polling applications and how they impact our understanding of public opinion**

- **Conclusions**

Why elections make good news

- **Elections are a central element of a democracy**

- **Occur on a schedule and can be planned and budgeted**

- **Are important and involve visible figures willing to be quoted**

- **Involve conflict with a resolution and declared winners and losers**

- **Have consequences for the control of government and the formulation of policy**

Did journalism invent polling?

- **Harrisburg *Pennsylvanian* (1824) straw poll in the Andrew Jackson - John Quincy Adams race based upon 504 purchases/votes**

- **Periodic efforts into the 20th Century culminating in *The Literary Digest*'s first national poll in 1916**

- **George Gallup and *The Washington Post* in 1936 predicted the *The Literary Digest* poll would be wrong and FDR would defeat Alf Landon**

The Founding Fathers

Face-to-face interviews and their logistics

# What happened in 1948?

The shift to telephone interviewing

Understanding the new polling environment

The combined advent of telephone penetration and discovery of the PC reduced the cost of interviewing and lowered the cost of entry into the field

Independent editorial judgements come to the fore

Partnerships between major metropolitan dailies and evening news broadcasts

Understanding the new polling environment
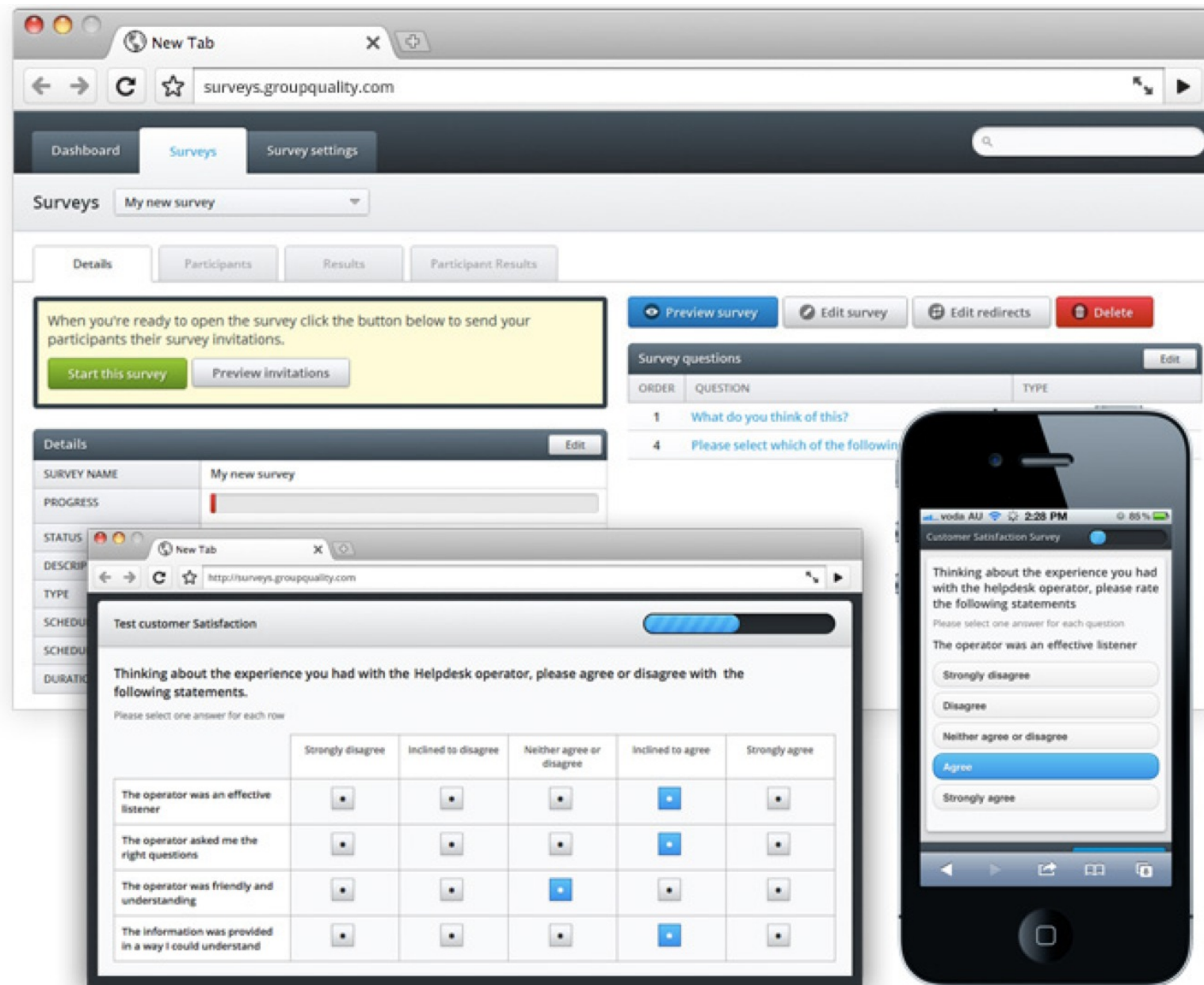
Issues with web polls

Pros

Speed of data collection

Potential use of audio and video stimuli

Cons

Sampling: penetration (representativeness) and self-selection

Potential for tampering

Issues with web polls

Regular driving tests could give older drivers more confidence on the road. *Source:* Supplied

AUSTRALIANS should be allowed to drive faster, not forced to take the slow lane with older motorists.

That is the overwhelming result of a news.com.au poll asking whether speed limits should be lowered which comes amid safety warnings about the increasing numbers of aging drivers headed for our roads.

Of more than 17,000 votes cast at the weekend almost 16,000 went for the response: "No, speed limits should be raised."

Issues with web polls

Rosenstiel's Identification of 6 Major Trends Affecting the Use of Polls in Today's News

1. Changes in the industry (cutbacks, repackaging secondhand material, demands of the 24-hour news cycle)

2. Proliferation of outlets offering news

3. Reduction in regular reporting: presenting information rather than gathering it

4. Growing reliance on daily tracking polls ("horse race" journalism)

5. Growing audience skepticism and political polarization

6. Inability of academics and pollsters to maintain standards and deepen journalists' understanding of public opinion research and how to use it in journalism

7. The data aggregators and modelers

What's going on in the contemporary news business?
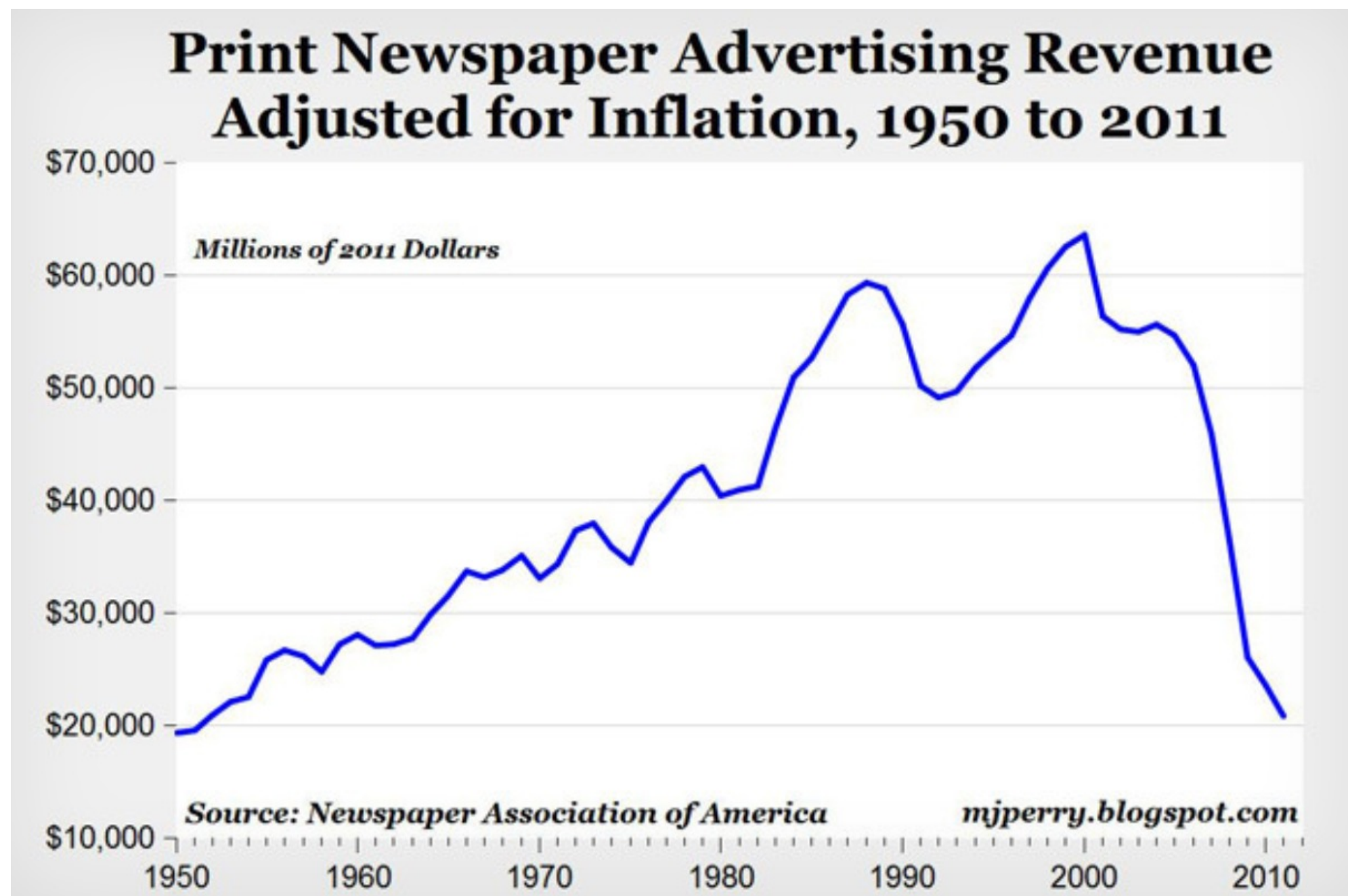
Print Newspaper Advertising Revenue Adjusted for Inflation, 1950 to 2011

Millions of 2011 Dollars

Source: Newspaper Association of America   mjperry.blogspot.com

What's going on in the contemporary news business?

Number of U.S. Daily Newspapers
Weekday and Sunday editions, yearly increments, 1990-2007
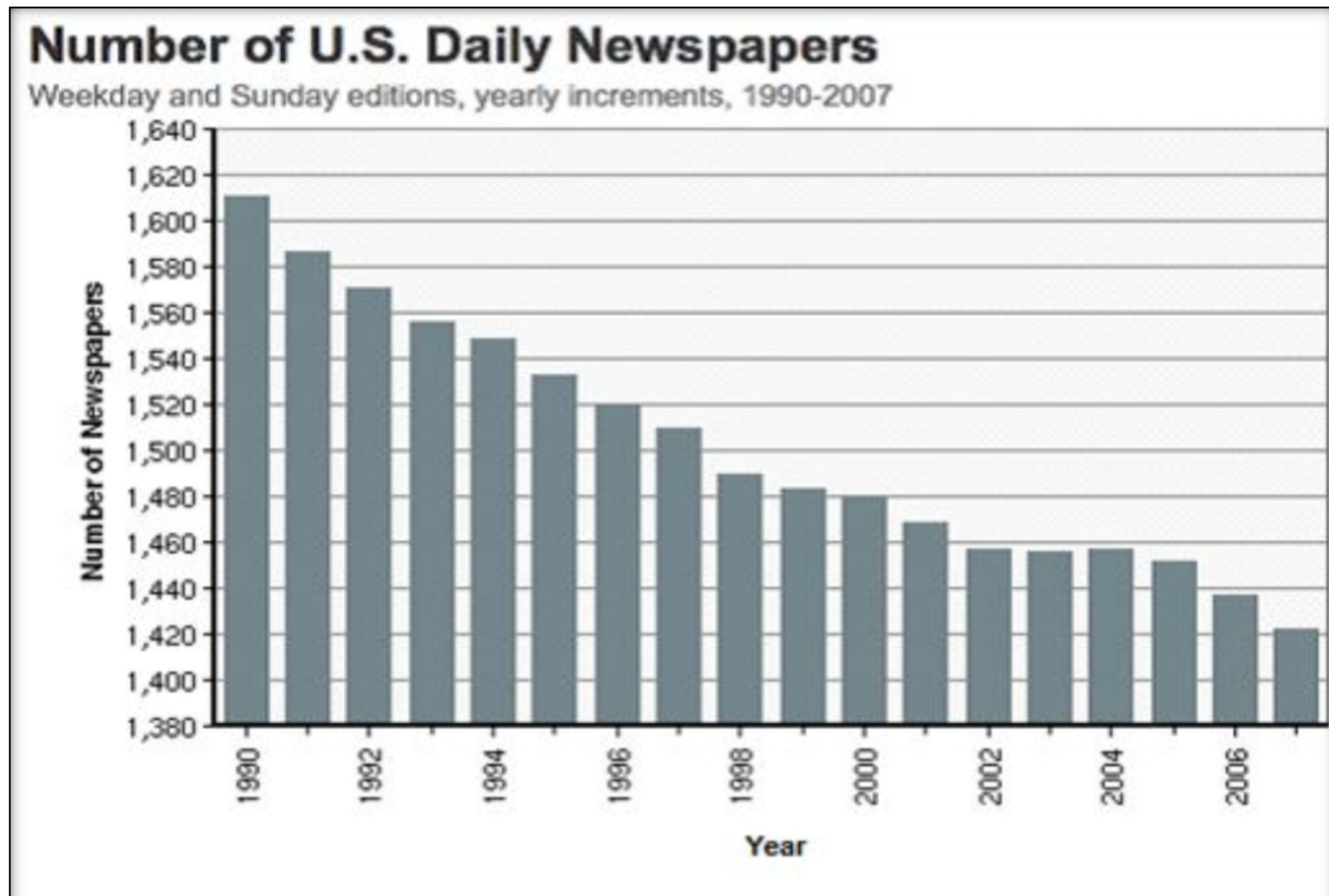
What's going on in the contemporary news business?
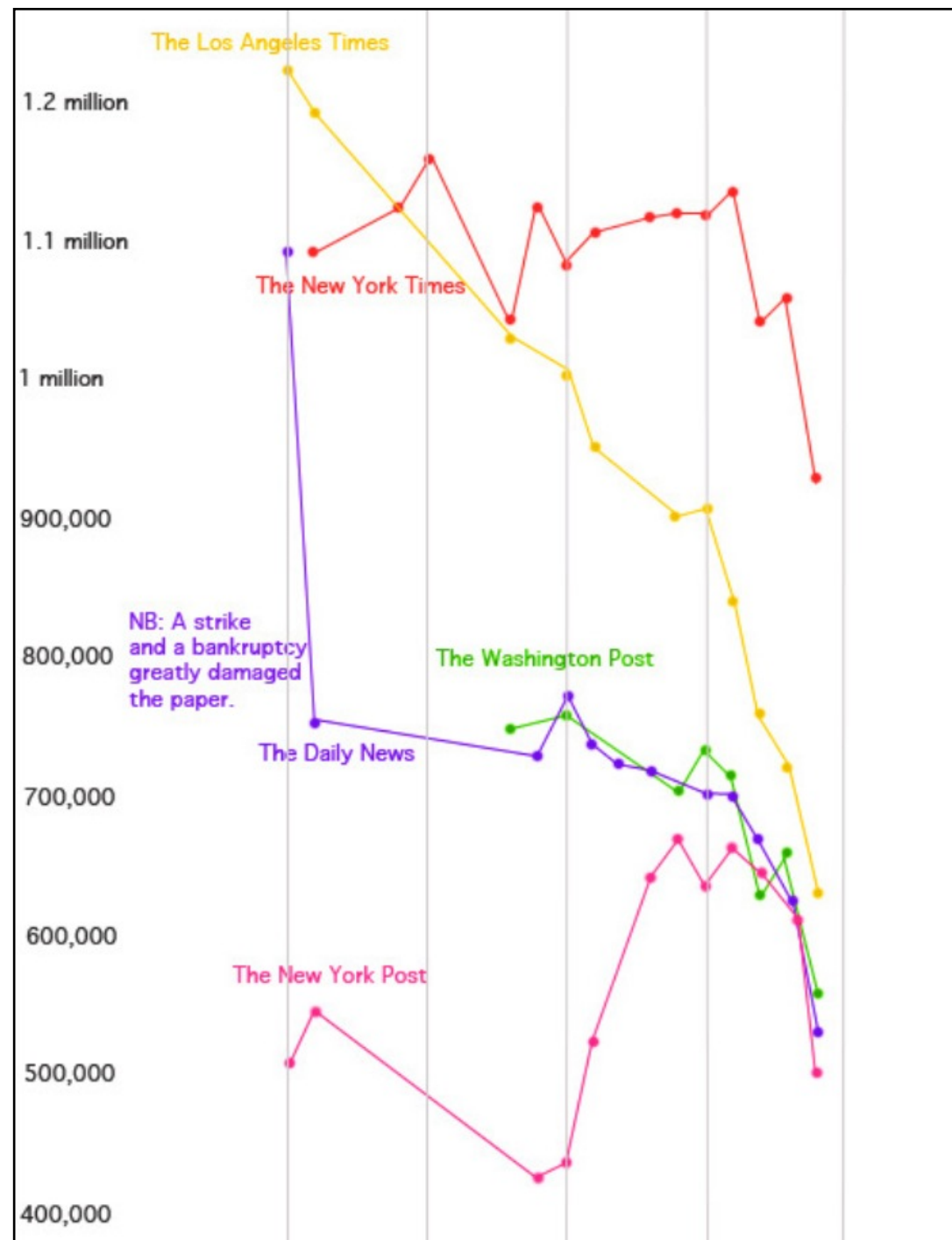
Major Daily Newspaper

Circulation since 1990

What's going on in the contemporary news business?

Newspaper Topics Differ from Media Over All

Percentage of Newshole

■ Newspaper ■ Media Over All

Topic	Newspaper	Media Over All
Foreign (Non-U.S.)	18.7%	17.6
Government Agencies	11.0	12.8
Economy	9.5	9.0
U.S. Foreign Affairs	7.8	9.9
Campaigns/Elections	6.5	10.6
Business	5.8	3.7
Other Domestic Affairs	5.3	4.2
Education	4.5	1.6
Health/Medicine	4.3	3.2
Crime	3.8	5.7
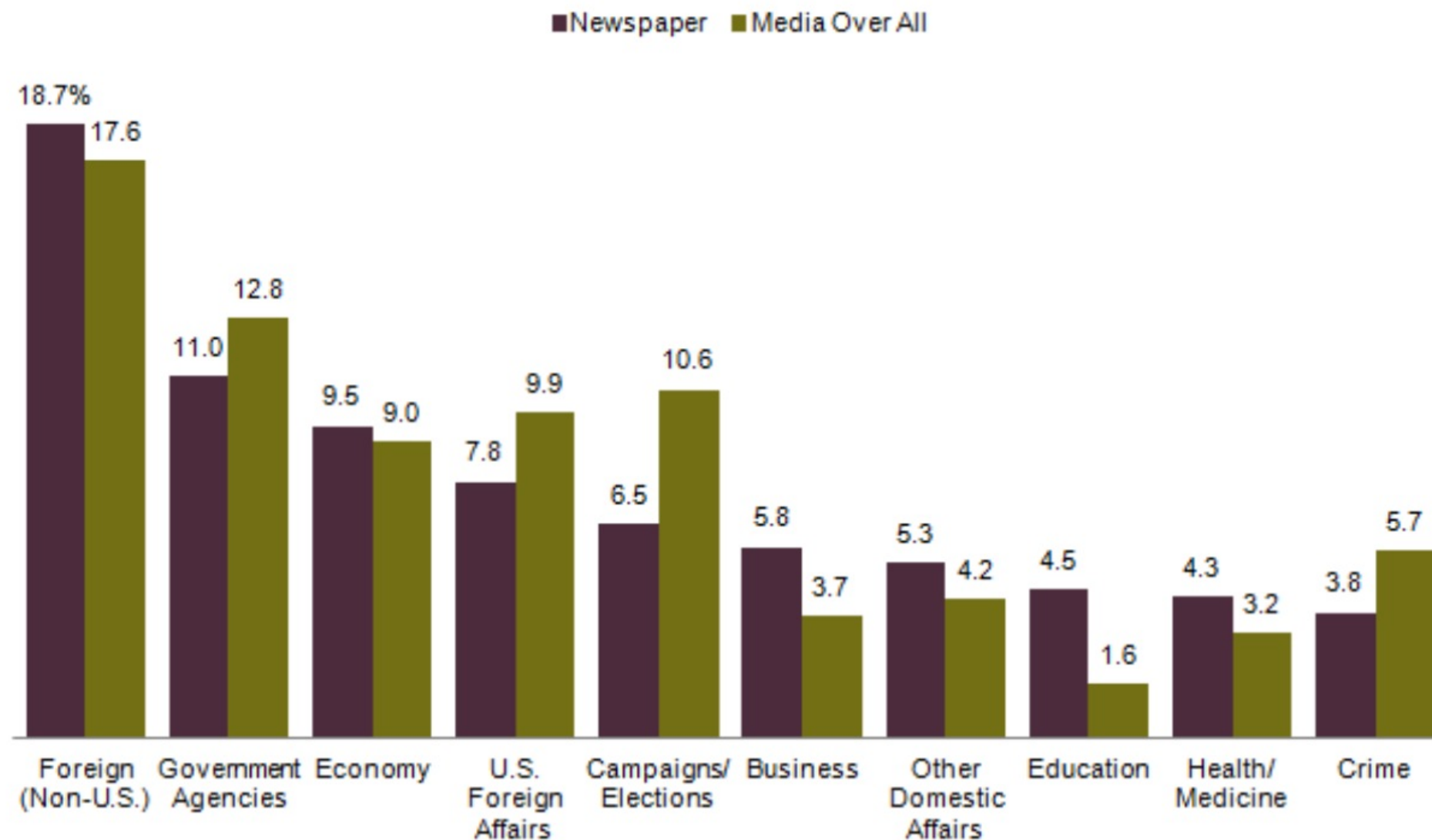
Source: PEJ, The Year in the News 2011

PEW RESEARCH CENTER'S PROJECT FOR EXCELLENCE IN JOURNALISM
2012 STATE OF THE NEWS MEDIA

Ultimate "Horse Race" Coverage

The impact of economics on polling

HUFFPOST ✗ POLLSTER

Exit Polls Canceled In 19 States

The Huffington Post | By Ariel Edwards-Levy 🐦 👍
Posted: 10/04/2012 1:24 pm Updated: 10/04/2012 7:23 pm

State-level exit polls after the election will only be conducted in 31 states this year, the *Washington Post* reports, with yet-to-be-named noncompetitive states excluded.

Exit polls, which are widely reported and used as a basis for research, have been conducted in each state after presidential elections since 1992. The National Election Pool, a consortium that includes the Associated Press, CNN, ABC News, CBS News, Fox News and NBC News, said interviews for a national exit poll will still include voters from all states.

ABC News director of elections Dan Merkle told the *Washington Post* the new plan would address growing expenses and "deliver a quality product in the most important states."

Conducting exit polling is a massive project, involving thousands of interviews conducted the day of the election, distributed to major news outlets and used to project the races after polls close.

Alaska, Arkansas, Delaware, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Kentucky, Louisiana, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, West Virginia and Wyoming will be excluded from the poll, as will the District of Columbia.

The impact of economics on polling

THE HILL

Ballot Box
THE HILL'S Campaign Blog

Pollster pulls out of Fla., NC and Va., says Obama can't win there

By Jonathan Easley - 10/10/12 08:58 AM ET

Suffolk University pollster David Paleologos, whose polls are aggregated into mainstream averages to show where the presidential race stands in the swing states, said he's finished polling in Florida, North Carolina and Virginia because President Obama has no shot of winning those states.

"I think in places like North Carolina, Virginia and Florida, we've already painted those red, we're not polling any of those states again," Paleologos said Tuesday night on Fox's "The O'Reilly Factor." "We're focusing on the remaining states."

Changes in contemporary reporting styles

A renewed focus on state-level data in conjunction with campaign targeting on "battleground states"

Estimating electoral vote counts as well as popular vote shares

Creating synthetic data from a "poll of polls"

Web sites and blogs have become an important venue for political news, including polls

SO WHAT WILL THE CALIFORNIA POLL FINAL PRESS RELEASE LOOK LIKE?

When all of the votes are finally counted, the California Poll's Presidential Election Model indicates that Hillary Rodham Clinton is likely to defeat Jeb Bush in the state's popular vote by 52% to 40%. The remainder of the vote will be split among the Peace and Freedom Party and two other smaller parties. This estimate is based upon a combination of pre-election interviews with both reported voters and likely voters on Tuesday. It takes into account historical patterns of voting in recent California presidential elections as well.

When considering all of these factors, Field Research is very confident that Clinton will win. Her margin might be as low at 7 percentage points, and it might be as high as 17 percentage points. Turnout is expected to be 11,600,000 votes.

The Data Aggregators

Increased emphasis on horse race coverage and the proliferation of polls at the state and national level has led to statistical modeling and the use of others' data

www.RealClearPolitics.com

www.MysteryPollster.com
  www.Pollster.com   www.huffingtonpost.com/news/pollster/

"Poblano" on www.DailyKos.com
  www.FiveThirtyEight.com   fivethirtyeight.blogs.nytimes.com

themonkeycage.org

election.princeton.edu

Washington Wire
Political Insight and Analysis From The Wall Street Journal's Capital Bureau

October 24, 2012, 4:42 PM

Aide: Obama Still Has Easier Path to Victory

Article | **Comments (12)**

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By Laura Meckler

DAVENPORT, Iowa–Obama campaign officials they aren't fazed by improved polling numbers for **Mitt Romney**, saying they always expected a close race. Still, senior White House adviser **David Plouffe** made a point Wednesday to try to direct media attention to the battleground states and suggested ignoring national surveys.

"I assume in the closing days here, the attention will move more quickly to what is your pathway to the presidency. How are you acquiring 270 electoral votes?" he told reporters on a bus from a Davenport, Iowa, rally, the first of six battleground states Mr. Obama will visit over an intense two-day swing through six battleground states.

"We think we maintain a lot more plausible pathways to 270 than Gov. Romney, who we think has to essentially pull an inside straight in the Electoral College," he added.

A change in reporting style
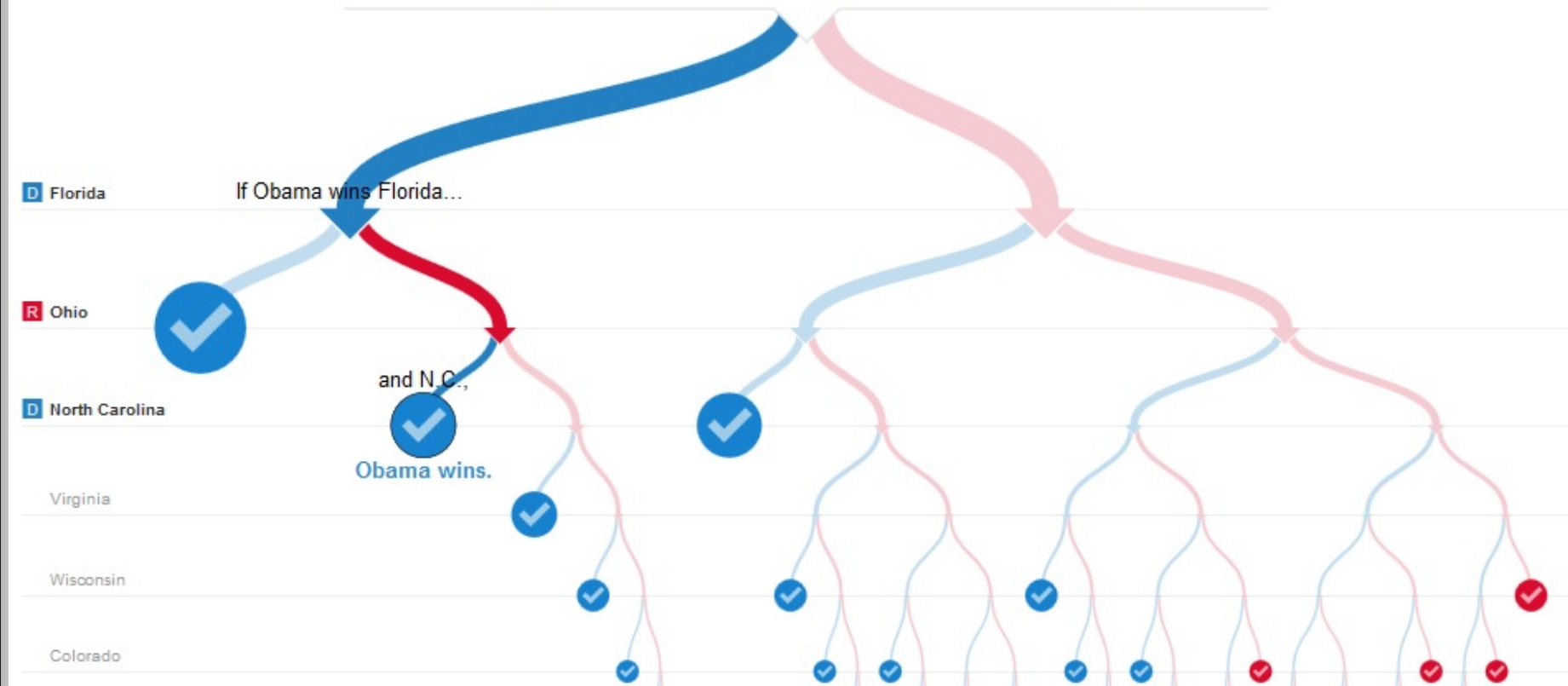
A change in reporting style

Case Study 1: CNN's Use of a "Poll of Polls" since 2004

NUMBER OF DAYS IN WHICH A NEW CNN "POLL OF POLLS" WAS RELEASED, 2004 - 12

PRE-CONVENTION	2004	2008	2012	
June	--	9	9	
July	--	7	30	
August	--	9	26	
TOTAL	0	25	65	
GENERAL ELECTION			Nat'l	St
September	1	24	15	16
October	14	29	15	12
November	1	3	2	4
TOTAL	16	56	32	32

Case Study 1: CNN's Use of a "Poll of Polls" since 2004

NUMBER OF INDIVIDUAL GENERAL ELECTION POLLS TO COMPUTE CNN "POLL OF POLLS," 2004-12

	2004	**2008**	**2012 Nat'l**	**2012 St**
2	--	--	--	1
3	--	26	5	18
4	--	13	5	5
5	3	17	5	5
6	5	9	5	--
7	1	6	4	1
8	2	7	4	--
9	--	1	--	--
10	3	1	2	--
11	2	1	--	--
	___	___	___	___
TOTAL	16	81	30	30

The CNN "Poll of Polls" in 2012

November 5th, 2012
03:22 PM ET

96 days ago

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COMMENTS (20 comments)

National polls all tied up

Posted by
CNN Political Editor Paul Steinhauser

Washington (CNN) – The day before the presidential election, an average of the eight national polls released Sunday and Monday indicates the race for the White House is all knotted up.

A CNN Poll of Polls compiled and released Monday afternoon indicates President Barack Obama at 49% and Republican nominee Mitt Romney at 48% among likely voters nationwide.

The CNN "Poll of Polls" in 2012

November 5th, 2012
12:25 PM ET

96 days ago

CNN Poll of Polls: Ohio a close contest on eve of election

Posted by
CNN's Ashley Killough

(CNN) – A new CNN Poll of Polls on Monday indicates the race in Ohio–perhaps the most decisive battleground this presidential cycle–is locked in a statistical dead heat.

Interactive Voice Recognition (IVR) Polls: A Technology for Low Cost Data Collection (LCDC)

Use of a digitized voice as an interviewer

Calls to landline phones only, now sometimes supplemented with Internet panel respondents who have a cell phone

Very brief interviews

Rapid data collection with a very low response rate

How good are the samples?

Case Study 2: How do poll-based news stories explain "Birthers"?

Mostly they don't - they just describe their prevalence in terms of marginals

When they offer explanations, they use demographics, party identification and ideology

Case Study 2: How do poll-based news stories explain "Birthers"?

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Published: Oct. 24, 2008 3:00 a.m.   Text: ⊞ ⊟ ↻   Next Article »

O.C. suspicions over Obama's citizenship continue

Allegations about the Democrats' birth certificate haven't gone away despite the widespread acceptance in both parties that his documents are valid.

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FEATURED SPECIAL SECTION

Celebrating marriages, births, and milestones around Orange County! CLICK TO SEE CELEBRATIONS

By MARTIN WISCKOL / The Orange County Register

Even some supporters of **John McCain** are dismayed with fellow Orange County Republicans who think **Barack Obama** was born outside of the U.S. and does not meet the requirements to be president.

An OC Political Pulse poll found that a third of responding Republicans thought Obama was born outside of the 50 United States. One GOP participant then wrote me to say she suspected those results were caused by non-Republicans gaming the poll, presumably to make Republicans look kooky.

But online reaction to a Total Buzz blog item on

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• Celebrations, Dec.

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Case Study 2: How do poll-based news stories explain "Birthers"?

The Prevalence of "Birther" Views
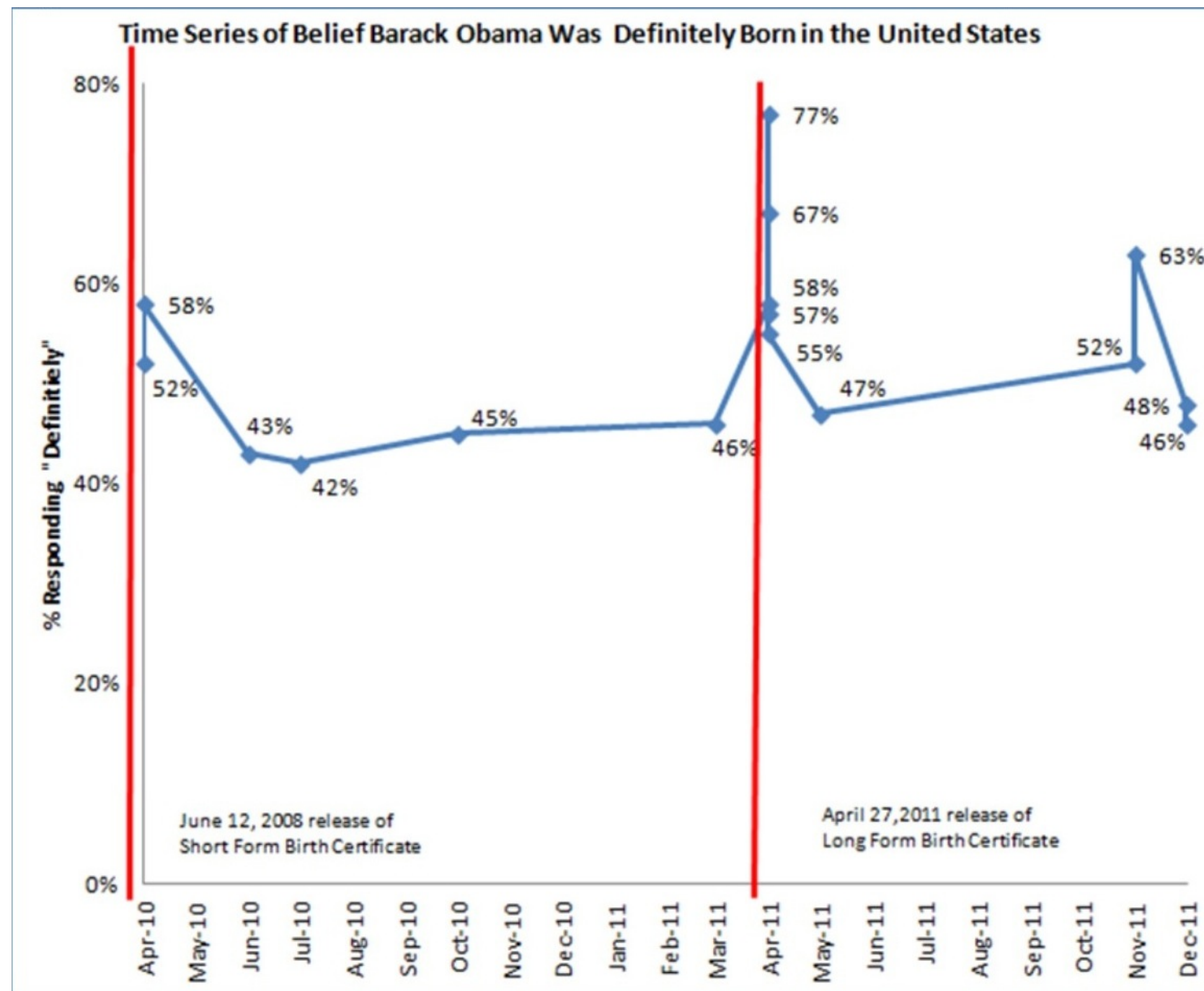
Administrative parameters of LCDC surveys

Vendor/Sponsor	Mode	Field Period	Sample Size	Total Cost	Median Length (min.)	Cost / Interview
ANES	Web	10/8 – 18 / 2010	1158	$39,920	25.0	$34.47
CNN/ORC*	Phone	4/29 – 5 /1/ 2011	1034	---	---	---
Gallup*	Phone	5/5 – 8 / 2011	1018	---	---	---
Mechanical Turk	Web	11/ 9 – 11 / 2011	1033	$ 590	5.0	$ 0.75
Pulse Opinion Research	IVR / Web	11 / 30 /2011	1007	$ 2,500	18.6	$ 3.57
Qualtrics Panel	Web	12/ 1 – 5 / 2011	752	$ 3,750	6.2	$ 5.00
Zoomerang	Web	12/ 1 – 5 / 2011	1071	$ 3,900	5.4	$ 5.57
Survey Monkey/ (Zoomerang)	Web	12 / 21 – 24 /2012	958	$ 3,780	9.0	$ 3.95

*Cost data are not available

How different are the samples?

The Mechanical Turk sample is much younger than the others (46.2% 18-29 years) while the Pulse Opinion Research sample is much older (43.0% 65+ years)

The LCD samples are more female, with Mechanical Turk at 59.5% and Pulse Opinion Research at 60.3%.

The %White in the Pulse Opinion Research sample is 90.8%.

The LCD samples are better educated, with 49.1% of the Mechanical Turk sample and 49.7% of the Pulse Opinion Research having a BA or more.

How do the samples look in political terms?

Party Identification (3-way)	ANES2010			Mechanical Turk_			Zoomerang			Pulse Opinion			Qualtrics Panel		
	N	UNW	W	N	UNW	W	N	UNW	W	N	UNW	W	N	UNW	W
Republican	330	27.3%	25.8%	285	28.3%	26.5%	359	36.7%	34.4%	558	49.3%	44.6%	270	36.0%	34.2%
Democrat	428	35.4	37.3	572	56.9	58.1	398	40.7	42.6	479	42.4	44.9	329	43.9	46.2
Independent	379	31.3	31.0	113	11.2	12.2	128	13.1	13.0	16	1.4	1.8	95	12.7	12.5
Other	72	6.0	5.9	36	3.6	3.2	94	9.6	9.9	78	6.9	8.7	56	7.5	7.1
Total	1209	100%	100%	1006	100%	100%	979	100%	100%	1131	100%	100%	750	100%	100%

Political Ideology	N	UNW	W	N	UNW	W	N	UNW	W	N	UNW	W	N	UNW	W
1. Very liberal	68	5.8%	6.1%	91	9.0%	8.3%	45	4.6%	4.4%	28	3.4%	3.3%	34	4.5%	4.8%
2. Somewhat liberal	135	11.5	11.8	212	21.1	20.7	125	12.7	13.5	103	12.4	13.4	99	13.2	14.4
3. A little liberal	130	11.1	11.1	181	18.0	18.4	90	9.2	8.8	80	9.7	8.9	65	8.7	8.4
4. Neither liberal nor conservative	344	29.3	29.4	207	20.6	20.3	267	27.2	27.2	181	21.9	25.4	232	30.9	30.5
5. A little conservative	157	13.4	13.4	120	11.9	11.6	101	10.3	10.4	139	16.8	15.7	70	9.3	9.5
6. Somewhat conservative	197	16.8	16.3	127	12.6	13.9	165	16.8	16.0	203	24.5	21.5	128	17.0	15.8
7. Very conservative	144	12.3	11.9	35	3.5	3.4	49	5.0	4.8	51	6.2	6.1	48	6.4	6.4
8. Not sure	.	.	.	33	3.3	3.4	139	14.2	14.9	43	5.2	5.6	75	10.0	10.3
Total	1175	100%	100%	1006	100%	100%	981	100%	100%	828	100%	100%	751	100%	100%

What does this produce in "Birther" responses?

Obama Birthplace	ANES2010			Mechanical Turk			Zoomerang			Pulse Opinion			Qualtrics Panel		
Definitely born in the United States	531	45.3%	46.6%	632	62.9%	63.2%	474	48.2%	50.1%	577	51.9%	54.8%	349	46.5%	48.7%
Probably born in the United States	320	27.3	26.8	211	21	20.1	159	16.2	15.1	249	22.4	21.3	143	19	18.3
Probably born in another country	216	18.4	17.9	80	8	7.4	130	13.2	12.8	189	17	15.7	93	12.4	11.4
Definitely born in another country	104	8.9	8.7	26	2.6	2.5	72	7.3	7	49	4.4	4.1	59	7.9	7.8
Not sure				56	5.6	6.7	149	15.1	15	48	4.3	4.1	107	14.2	13.7
Total	1171	100%	100%	1005	100%	100%	984	100%	100%	1112	100%	100%	751	100%	100%

How do social scientists explain "Birthers"?

The theory of Motivated Reasoning

Partisanship and ideology play an important role, but so do racial attitudes over and above those factors, in explaining why some people ignore factual information presented in the news - such as two versions of Barack Obama's birth certificate

Some research suggests that behavioral elements of web use also play a role - not necessarily web searches or the use of certain web sites but perhaps the act of forwarding information in emails or on Facebook

How do such explanations hold up in Low Cost Data Collections (LCDC)?

Means for a measure of Racial Resentment for Whites (4-pt. scale 0 -1)

ANES	**.652 (919)**
Mechanical Turk	**.570 (793)**
Zoomerang	**.671 (765)**
Qualtrics Panel	**.669 (607)**
Pulse Opinion Research	**.616 (830)**

How do such explanations hold up in Low Cost Data Collections (LCDC)?

OLS Regressions Explaining "Birther" Beliefs

	ANES	MT	ZOOM	Qualtrics	POR
Gender (Male)	**	**		*	
Age (Older)			**		
Income (Lower)	*	**			
Education (Lower)	***	**	*		**
Party ID (Republican)	***	**	***	***	***
Ideology (Conservative)	**	***	***	**	***
Racial Resentment	.247***	.114***	.329***	.238***	.262***
R^2	.241	.298	.316	.339	.354

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Where are we now? Where do we go next?

New data collection methods are changing the nature of campaign reporting

Citizens get more facts but a weaker understanding of the structural meaning and impact of elections

Campaigns lose their function and role as a way to hold incumbents accountable

Politics becomes a game, and citizens lose the meaning of the mandate that the winner receives to govern

Where are we now? Where do we go next?

Continuing push for greater transparency

Clinton and Rogers: why IVR accuracy is so high

Review / revision in the standard geographical sample

Prepare for new technological advances

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Mary Ellen Smith, Kennedy School, Harvard University; Julia Lee and Ashley Jardina, University of Michigan