Public Opinion
Polls in the News

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Center for Political Studies
University of Michigan

JPSM Distinguished Lecture
College Park, MD
April 5, 2013
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
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](http://www.news.com.au) 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?
What's going on in the contemporary news business?

Number of U.S. Daily Newspapers
Weekday and Sunday editions, yearly increments, 1990-2007

Year
- 1990
- 1992
- 1994
- 1996
- 1998
- 2000
- 2002
- 2004
- 2006

Number of Newspapers
- 1,640
- 1,620
- 1,600
- 1,580
- 1,560
- 1,540
- 1,520
- 1,500
- 1,480
- 1,460
- 1,440
- 1,420
- 1,400
- 1,380
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

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
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.
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

"Poblano" on www.DailyKos.com

themonkeycage.org

election.princeton.edu
A change in reporting style

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2012</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PRE-CONVENTION</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>July</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

|                  |      | Nat'l | St |
| **GENERAL ELECTION** |      |       |    |
| 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2012 Nat'l</th>
<th>2012 St</th>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>26</td>
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<td>13</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The CNN "Poll of Polls" in 2012

National polls all tied up

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

(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"?

Published: Oct. 24, 2008 3:00 a.m.

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.

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

58 percent of GOP not sure/doubt Obama born in US

July 31, 2009
Categories: Obama

A whopping 58 percent of Republicans either think Barack Obama wasn't born in the US (28 percent) or aren't sure (30 percent). A mere 42 percent think he was.

That means a majority of Republicans polled either don't know about -- or don't believe the seemingly incontrovertible evidence Obama's camp has presented over and over and over that he was born in Hawaii in '01.
The Prevalence of "Birther" Views

The graph shows the time series of belief that Barack Obama was definitely born in the United States. The percentage of respondents who believe Obama was definitely born in the United States fluctuates over time, with notable increases following the release of the short form birth certificate on June 12, 2008, and the long form birth certificate on April 27, 2011.
# Administrative parameters of LCDC surveys

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

*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?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party Identification (3-way)</th>
<th>ANES2010</th>
<th>Mechanical Turk</th>
<th>Zoomerang</th>
<th>Pulse Opinion</th>
<th>Qualtrics Panel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>359</td>
<td>558</td>
<td>270</td>
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<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>428</td>
<td>572</td>
<td>398</td>
<td>479</td>
<td>329</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>379</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1209</td>
<td>1006</td>
<td>979</td>
<td>1131</td>
<td>750</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Ideology</th>
<th>ANES2010</th>
<th>Mechanical Turk</th>
<th>Zoomerang</th>
<th>Pulse Opinion</th>
<th>Qualtrics Panel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Very liberal</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Somewhat liberal</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. A little liberal</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Neither liberal nor conservative</td>
<td>344</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. A little conservative</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Somewhat conservative</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Very conservative</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Not sure</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1175</td>
<td>1006</td>
<td>981</td>
<td>828</td>
<td>751</td>
</tr>
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</table>
What does this produce in "Birther" responses?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Obama Birthplace</th>
<th>ANES2010</th>
<th>Mechanical Turk</th>
<th>Zoomerang</th>
<th>Pulse Opinion</th>
<th>Qualtrics Panel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Definitely born in the United States</td>
<td>531</td>
<td>62.9%</td>
<td>48.2%</td>
<td>51.9%</td>
<td>46.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>632</td>
<td>63.2%</td>
<td>50.1%</td>
<td>54.8%</td>
<td>48.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probably born in the United States</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>211</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probably born in another country</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>189</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>80</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitely born in another country</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>59</td>
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<td></td>
<td>26</td>
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<td>7.3</td>
<td>4.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>1005</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>100%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1171</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>N</th>
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<tr>
<td>ANES</td>
<td>.652</td>
<td>919</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanical Turk</td>
<td>.570</td>
<td>793</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zoomerang</td>
<td>.671</td>
<td>765</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualtrics Panel</td>
<td>.669</td>
<td>607</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pulse Opinion Research</td>
<td>.616</td>
<td>830</td>
</tr>
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</table>
How do such explanations hold up in Low Cost Data Collections (LCDC)?

## OLS Regressions Explaining "Birther" Beliefs

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ANES</th>
<th>MT</th>
<th>ZOOM</th>
<th>Qualtrics</th>
<th>POR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender (Male)</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (Older)</td>
<td>**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income (Lower)</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (Lower)</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party ID (Republican)</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology (Conservative)</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial Resentment</td>
<td>.247***</td>
<td>.114***</td>
<td>.329***</td>
<td>.238***</td>
<td>.262***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ R^2 \]                 
- ANES: .241
- MT: .298
- ZOOM: .316
- Qualtrics: .339
- POR: .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
Thank You to

Department of Communication Studies

Howard R. Marsh Center for the Study of Journalistic Performance

Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy, Harvard University

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