

MAPOR

The Newsletter of the Midwest Association for Public Opinion Research

Spring 2005

Whither Public Opinion and its Measurement? The 2005 MAPOR Conference

by David Tewksbury, 2005 Program Chair

With almost one voice, academic researchers, public opinion professionals, and media observers are calling the contemporary public information environment chaotic and conflict-ridden. At the same time, researchers looking at information flows in the media continue to see highly uniform and controlled messages emanating from powerful actors in our society.

Thus, in a time of apparent turmoil and change, elite information flows continue to have a central place in public discourse. Indeed, it may be that in such times our attention to how information reaches the population and how public opinion reaches our leaders assume even more importance than usual.

The MAPOR conference theme this year is "*Messages for the Masses: Measuring Public Opinion in Modern Democracies.*" Our goal is to encourage participants to consider their research in terms of the ways that our current social, political, and economic environment is shaping communication

processes and opinion formation.

There are two facets of the theme that might be considered.

One element is the role that new technologies are assuming in contemporary opinion formation and transmission. On the one hand, there is some evidence that audiences, activists, and the politically involved are using elements of the Internet to alter some very basic relationships between the leaders and the led.

We can see this, for example, in how some audiences specialize their news reading online, often gathering news about very focused topics and ignoring others. We can also see it in the growing popularity and apparent influence of Web logs.

On the other hand, the technology of how information about citizens—their beliefs, opinions, and concerns—reaches leaders is also undergoing change. The growing use of Web surveys, the evolving effects of diversifying telephone technologies, and the many

ways that people electronically speak their minds continue to affect what we know about Americans today.

A second facet is the apparent desire of those interested in influencing policy to exert greater control over media messages than ever before. Research in framing and other message effects has demonstrated that when public actors shape how issues are discussed in popular discourse, they can influence how audiences come to understand problems and policies.

However, economic and technological developments of the past two decades appear to have made it harder for actors to control messages. Perhaps as a result, policy actors appear to be working harder than ever to maintain that control. The recent controversy over video press releases issued by the federal government nicely illustrates the effort and its costs.

The 2005 MAPOR conference may provide

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The President's Column

By Douglas Blanks Hindman

The MAPOR Board met recently in Chicago to plan the November 18 and 19, 2005, conference. As long-time MAPOR members know, the annual conference, always the Friday and Saturday before Thanksgiving, is a great venue to present research addressing a wide range of public opinion topics. The call for proposals for our 2005 MAPOR conference is included with this newsletter.

End of shameless plug for the conference.

Two current issues come to mind when I think about the theme for the 2005 MAPOR Conference, Messages for the Masses: Measuring Public Opinion in Modern Democracies. (Oops. Another plug for the conference). One is the types of messages that result from the division of U.S. politics into mutually hostile camps. The other is the types of messages that accompany what 2005 MAPOR luncheon speaker Don Dillman calls the social trend towards self-administration. He is referring to the self-administration of a bizarre variety of processes that once required human interaction, such as banking, paying bills, buying a tank of gas, pregnancy testing, and surveys.

What are some of the research implications of messages created in an

environment of social fragmentation and self-administration, and how are the two related?

Alert MAPOR members will recall that last year's MAPOR conference theme was Polarized Publics: Something or Other about Methods. We were all excited about the Red State/Blue State divide. But now, between elections, the partisan rhetoric is really flying, unencumbered by any fear of alienating moderates.

None of this is new, of course. What is new is the level of control that elites exert over Messages for the Masses. Message control is evident as party hacks pose as journalists, as entire radio and television networks have become devoted to the support of single political perspectives, as the opposition is excluded from Town Hall Meetings, and as all levels of government resist access to public information much in the same way that corporations protect trade secrets.

The problem is that messages for the masses are created in the absence of messages from the masses. That is where you and your public opinion research comes in.

Researchers like you are asking: How are heavy viewers of partisan media different from the rest of the population? How are policy

makers and voters swayed by widespread claims of media bias, liberal conspiracies, and conservative backlash? How does exposure to micro-media and the partisan press frame the individual's perception of reality? What are the issues that are important to citizens, but that are systematically ignored by the mass media?

Questions about the impact of message control and a socially fragmented press become important as broadcast television network audiences decline, and as newspaper editors such as Steve Smith of the Spokane Spokesman-Review sadly confess that the printed newspaper is "thoroughly and utterly doomed."

Public opinion research is especially important when no one else is asking the questions about the greater good. Social fragmentation and isolation may mean difficult times for democracies, but it also means that researchers have lots of important work to do.

Answer the call for proposals, conveniently included in this newsletter.

Your country needs you. Democracy needs you. MAPOR needs you, your research proposals, and your room nights in the economically priced conference hotel. But I'll save that plug for later.

Happy writing!

Student Paper Competition

MAPOR announces its eighth annual Student Paper Competition. The first place winner will receive an award of \$200, a free conference registration, and a free ticket to the Friday MAPOR luncheon. Any other top quality papers judged Honorable Mention will earn authors a free conference registration and luncheon ticket.

A group of MAPOR Fellows will make the awards. Abstracts of the 2004 winners of the competition are featured on pages 4 and 5 of this newsletter.

Details regarding the competition rules are in the "MAPOR Fellow Student Paper Competition" announcement, which is included with this newsletter. The basic guidelines of the Student Paper Competition are explained in the following paragraphs.

Students need not be members of MAPOR to submit papers. The topic must conform to the general areas of scholarship that MAPOR addresses, which are public opinion and survey methods. The papers need not be quantitative

nor must they report data in order to qualify for consideration in this competition.

Students first need to submit an abstract of their paper to this year's program chair, David Tewksbury, conforming to the 2005 MAPOR Call for Papers by June 30. Students should specify on a letter accompanying the abstract that they are students.

Once a student has been informed that his/her paper is accepted for the 2005 conference, then the student will need to submit three (3) copies of a full paper by regular mail to Rick Perloff, which must be received by October 1 to be eligible for the 2005 competition. His address is:

Professor Richard M. Perloff
Department of Communication
Cleveland State University
2121 Euclid Avenue
MU231
Cleveland, OH 44115

Officer Nominations Needed for 2005-2006

The MAPOR Board is seeking nominations for two officers in 2005-2006. The officers that will be elected are—vice president/president elect and program co-chair.

Nominations should be emailed to:

Douglas Blanks Hindman
President—MAPOR
dhindman@wsu.edu

The vice president/president elect assists with the Board's decision making process and becomes president of MAPOR in the subsequent year. The program co-chair assists the program chair in the subsequent year.

MAPOR elections are held in the fall. New officers assume their duties following the year's conference.

Top 2004 Student Paper Abstracts . . .

Mobilizing Information Online: The Effects of Primary-Source and Secondary-Source Website use on Political Participation

Bruce Hardy
Cornell University

This study explores the effects of two distinct types of informational uses of the Internet on political engagement. Based on an integrated theoretical model, this study simultaneously examines the influence of traditional mass media use, interpersonal discussion on politics, primary-source website use, and secondary-source website use on political engagement. Primary-source websites are websites that are connected to governmental institutions, special interest groups, and

political actors, while secondary-source websites are commercial news web sources such as CNN.com or MSNBC.com. Using a cross-sectional national data set, based on a telephone survey probability sample of almost 800 adults, a structural equation model was generated and produced a pathway of direct and indirect effects of different forms of communication on political engagement. Findings suggest that use of primary-source websites and secondary-source websites

are conceptually different and that the use of mobilizing information available on primary-source websites directly influences participation. These findings validate and expand upon previous research on the link between Internet use and political engagement. Overall, the analyses suggest that different types of information available on different types of websites have different civic consequences.

**Measurable hesitation as a precursor to self-censorship:
Replication and extension of the minority slowness effect**

Michael Huye
The Ohio State University

Past research indicates that those in the minority may be more hesitant to express their opinion when compared to those in the majority. Response latency has been put forth as a possible outcome measure of the reception and internalization of majority pressure. In a laboratory setting, participants were asked to offer simple judgments (e.g., “like” or “dislike”) for various digitized images of both political and non-political persons, things, and ideas. Responses were recorded and categorized according to majority or minority status. These data were then analyzed at both the subject and the object level in an attempt to better understand the link between the climate of opinion and response hesitancy. Overall, those in the minority took longer to offer responses when compared to those in the majority. This relationship was positively correlated with the size of the majority. Furthermore, individual differences were found to moderate the minority slowness effect. The effect was also found to be stronger for political objects when compared to non-political objects.

Top 2004 Student Paper Abstracts (continued)

**Mobilizing information as a link to political participation:
A content analysis of online and print newspapers**

Lindsay H. Hoffman
The Ohio State University

Much research has proliferated over the last half-century regarding media use and declining political participation. Some media use, like watching television, has been blamed for this decline while others, such as newspaper reading, have been strongly correlated with political participation. With the advent of the Internet, many newspapers are going online to take advantage of expanded space, nonlinear features, and around-the-clock accessibility.

Researchers have questioned whether the Internet could provide mobilization to the electorate. If the print newspaper is associated with political participation, then one of the first steps in answering the question of Internet effects is to examine the content of online newspapers. This study sought to explain whether online newspapers can be associated with “mobilization” theories of the Internet or if the content is essentially the same as their

print versions, supporting “reinforcement” theories. This was assessed through a content analysis of the presence of mobilizing information, or information that aids people to act on attitudes they already hold, in both print and online news content. It was found that online newspapers did not significantly differ from their print counterparts, disputing the theory that the Internet—at least when it comes to online newspapers—has more mobilizing content than print.

**Information environments and voter deliberation:
Unraveling the effects of campaign intensity**

Michael Xenos
University of Washington

This study seeks to illuminate the mechanisms at work research on the effects of campaign intensity on voters. In intense contests, perceived closeness of the race stimulates greater media coverage and candidate communications. Survey research suggests that these factors enable voters to form stronger opinions and more sophisticated judgments. But the fact that these factors tend to co-occur in intense political contests, while seldom individually appearing in low intensity races raises questions of whether these effects are the product of the interplay between these factors, or simply a function of one or two. Public opinion and political psychology literatures suggest a variety of hypotheses and possible mechanisms responsible for these variations.

In this paper, I explore these issues empirically using an experimental approach. The findings suggest that though clearly related to the behavior of journalists, perceived closeness of race has no main effect on opinion quality. Negative tone also produced no main effect, although there was an effect of negative messages contingent on high volume such that a barrage of negative messages appears to have a strongly negative effect on opinion quality. Overall, the findings suggest that the level of information presented to voters may be the chief mechanism through which campaign intensity effects voters. The implications of these findings for the study of opinion quality and voter deliberation, as well as for public policy initiatives designed to stimulate greater citizen deliberation are also discussed

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researchers with an opportunity to explore message control and its effects both on the production of media content and on the formation and expression of opinion.

As always, MAPOR welcomes research proposals addressing any or all aspects of the theme, as well as any topic relevant to public opinion research, theory, or methodology. If you plan to propose an invited panel, please submit your proposal along with a complete list of participants.

Please submit abstracts as electronic attachments in MS Word or PDF format via e-mail to tewksbur@uiuc.edu. If you are unable to send attachments, send the abstract by regular mail to:

David Tewksbury
MAPOR Program Chair
Department of Speech
Communication
University of Illinois at
Urbana-Champaign
244 Lincoln Hall
702 W. Wright St.
Urbana, IL 61801

All abstracts must be received no later than **June 30, 2005, 5pm CDT**. The details are on the Call for Papers.

We are also holding our eighth MAPOR Fellows Student Papers contest (see the Student Call for Papers). Each paper is thoroughly reviewed by top public

opinion scholars in our field.

Finally, please consider making your hotel reservations early, and plan to take advantage of the special MAPOR rate. If you make your reservations through the hotel and use the MAPOR rate, you'll help us meet our room guarantee and help us control the costs of the conference.

I hope to see all of you at the 2005 MAPOR conference.

**MAPOR
2005 Conference**

*Messages for the
Masses:
Measuring Public
Opinion in Modern
Democracies*

November 18 -19

**Radisson Hotel
& Suites
Chicago**

312-787-2900

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