

Graduate Paper #2

Polls as Persuasion Instruments in Public Diplomacy:

A Case Study of “Guerrilla Polls” in Syria

Michael Jablonski, J.D. (Ph.D. Candidate)
Department of Communication
Georgia State University

Keywords

Polls, public diplomacy, Syria, persuasion, Google, polling standards, diffusion of information

Abstract

This case study of a nongovernmental organization (NGO) performing public opinion polling examines the role of a non-state actor in public diplomacy. Two polls conducted in Syria during 2010 and 2011 by the Democracy Council employed insufficiently rigorous technique to accurately assess commonly held beliefs, leading to a supposition that they constituted tools in a persuasion campaign. The use of poll results by an NGO that may influence perceptions of the Syrian regime complicates public diplomacy. The validity of the polls was tested in two ways. First, comparison of the methodology as described in the poll reports and media statements by the pollsters with standards established by professional polling organizations disclosed significant departures from generally accepted standards in areas of poll construction, sampling, and analysis. Second, statements made by the pollsters following release of the polls were analyzed for consistency with the actual poll reports and were via the Google search engine to determine dispersal. The analysis of media reports showed that the pollsters made claims for the polls not supported by their data. The persistence of language taken from the original press report evidenced wide dispersal across the Internet. The failure to adhere to accepted standards, extravagant claims made for the poll, and the diffusion analysis support an inference that the poll was conducted for argumentative purposes.

Introduction

Since “public diplomacy is everyone’s business” a small group failing to conform to national policy invites international disrepute (Cull, 2010, p. 15). A non-state actor may embody the potential to undermine national goals by acting in a manner inconsistent with national aspirations. Where an organization seeks to establish credibility at the

expense of truth, as in guerrilla polling, ethical foundations of public diplomacy erode (Izadi, 2009).

The original conception of public diplomacy embraced non-governmental and private sector actors as participants influencing international perception (Roth, 1984). Non state actors complicate the management of message (Salamon, 1994). Aided by development of digital media tools, NGOs may be able to sway perceptions of both domestic and foreign publics (Bach & Stark, 2002). This ability to sway opinion takes on increased significance in volatile environments. While a non-state actor may share the same public diplomacy agenda as a state actor, it may be able to operate with less political scrutiny and risk than a state actor in volatile environments.

In 2010, an American NGO, The Democracy Council, conducted two “guerrilla polls” in Syria. Unlike traditional public opinion polls that follow accepted practices of research and reporting of public opinion, guerrilla polling is used as a persuasive tactic. Angela Hawken and Matt Leighty, writing in *Foreign Policy*, created the term “guerrilla pollsters” to describe polling employing “new technologies and practices to circumvent government restrictions and give a voice to the silenced” (Hawken & Leighty, 2010). The label emphasizes circumvention of constraints inhibiting the ability of public opinion pollsters to accurately assess attitudes. Additionally, neither the nature of Syrian restraints on polling nor their effectiveness are explicated, nor does Democracy Council acknowledge that polls, such as the *Terror Free Tomorrow* survey conducted by D3 in 2007, have been conducted telephonically in Syria (*Terror Free Tomorrow*, 2007).

This paper analyzes a polling activity by an NGO that may have been a persuasion tactic targeting both Syrian and American publics. Public diplomacy encompasses both the attitudes of international publics towards the United States and American attitudes towards international publics (Zaharna, 2010, p. 19). First the paper profiles the Democracy Council polls. This is followed by a literature review focused on the connections between polling and persuasion. The analysis highlights the persuasive features found in the Democracy Council polls. The paper concludes with a discussion of guerrilla polling and its implications for influencing public opinion in public diplomacy.

The Democracy Council Polls

The Democracy Council, an American NGO, promotes programs facilitating sustainable economic opportunity in the Middle East and Latin America (“Who We Are,” 2011). The initial poll report states that the project was initiated by Democracy Council but does not disclose the source of funds used by the NGO to pay for the poll (Hawken et al., 2010). The American Association of Public Opinion Research, among others, mandates disclosure “to the extent known, all original funding sources” either in the report or immediately upon release of the report (AAPOR, 2010).

The first poll report, released on August 5, 2010, analyzed data acquired in personal surveys of 1046 Syrian adults between January 16 and February 6, 2010 (Hawken, et al. 2010). The follow-up report dated September 20, 2011 incorporated findings from

551 interviews conduct between August 24 and September 2, 2011 (Hawken, et al., 2011).

The 2010 poll report disclosed few details regarding poll design. The methodology description in the report says, in its entirety:

All respondents are Syrians over 18. Results described in this report reflect the responses of 1046 Syrian nationals who were residing in Syria at the time of data collection.

In-person surveys were conducted in Arabic by trained data collectors. Data-collection field staff were trained by a professional statistician via Skype seminars. Sixty data collectors were hired, organized by province, according to population. Due to sensitivities surrounding data collection in Syria, field staff were required to strictly adhere to an oral script.

This survey was not approved by the Syrian government. Any data collected outside the auspices of the Syrian government is prohibited under Syrian law. Concerns for safety of data collectors and survey respondents meant that a truly national representative sample based on random selection was not possible. Data collectors were trained how to select respondents, with the aim of collecting data representative of the Syria population (with respect to region, rural/urban, sex, age, religion, and education)(Hawken et al., 2010, pp. 4–5).

Foreign Policy released more detail. Arab speaking agents administering in-person interviews were recruited by word-of-mouth and screened for education communication skills. Background checks excluded any with government contacts. None claimed experience as interviewers. Skype encrypted videoconferencing capabilities allowed Democracy Council to train interviewers without convening face-to-face meetings (Hawken & Leighty, 2010).

The 2011 survey employed substantially the same methodology with curious modifications. The poll report reveals that the original field staff disappeared as a result of “circumstances” forcing “field coordinators to identify, vet, and train a new group of Syrian data collectors” (Hawken et al., 2011, p. 6). Sixty data collectors, organized by province “according to population,” were hired (Hawken et al., 2011, p. 6). In its description of the 2011 poll, the Democracy Council divulged the existence of a 2010 data-collection manual provided to two Syrian trainers brought out of the country for instruction. The two “then trained eight additional data collectors inside Syria by secure VOIP communications and in person” (Hawken et al., 2011, p. 6). The second poll employed a sample size half that of the first. (n=551 vs. n=1046). Surveys were conducted in Arabic, with the results scanned, delivered to a transfer station in Turkey,

and then transported to Los Angeles for data input by the Democracy Council (Hawken et al., 2011, p. 6).

The 2011 report concedes an inability to implement a methodology drawing an unambiguously representative sample of the population, resulting in selection bias. The report admits, "Finally, we recognize that those agreeing to participate in such an exercise, without host government approval, would be inherently more likely to express anti-government sentiment" (Hawken et al., 2011, p. 6). As in 2010, weighting adjustments attempted to rationalize discrepancies in the survey by matching characteristics in the sample to the Syrian population. The report does not disclose which characteristics were deemed salient, the relative importance of each characteristic, the source of Syrian population data, or the calculated weights (Hawken et al., 2011, pp. 7–8).

Polling and Persuasion

The overt purpose of any public opinion poll is to assess popular attitudes, sentiments, and beliefs by collecting data from a portion of the population in the expectation that the sample reflects with confidence beliefs held by the population as a whole. A poll can be used for purposes other than assessing popular beliefs, such as molding opinion. Public opinion polls mediate political beliefs and behaviors (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, Oct-Dec1994; Hardy & Jamieson, 2005; Mutz, 1992). Scientific polls develop a representative model of beliefs maintained by a target population through scrupulous sampling architecture or appropriate data weighting. Statistical analysis of samples >1000 respondents assures reasonably tolerable significance. Straw polls, by contrast, employ less scientifically rigorous methodologies resulting in sample bias either through design deficiencies or self-selection of the sample (Nancarrow, Tinson, & Evans, 2004).

Polls may intensify support for a position. "Pressure groups can target their published polls at policy-makers, the media, their own supporters (to galvanise or to reassure), opponents (to demoralise) and the undecided (to encourage conversion)." (Nancarrow et al., 2004, p. 644) While belief that one is in the minority may inhibit articulation of attitudes favorable to a position (Noelle-Neumann, 1974), "to discover that one is in the majority may lead to more vocal behavior." (Nancarrow et al., 2004, p. 645) Outliers maintaining beliefs demonstrably discordant with popular attitudes may reconsider positions and revise attitudes (Festinger, 1957).

Polls demarcating the boundaries of popular belief become benchmarks of popular opinion. If it can be shown that the orientation of attitudes progresses steadily in a favorable direction then a movement may benefit from bandwagoning as individuals move to join the winning side (Marsh 1984). For those already on that side or leaning that way, confirmation provided by favorable poll reports reinforces opinion (Lang & Lang, 1984). The persuasive effect of poll results on behavior appears to be negatively correlated to education (Boudreau & McCubbins, 2010).

Bias may be incorporated into the architecture of a poll, especially a poll where the costs of conducting the survey may exceed the utility of the information obtained (Tull, 1975). Bias facilitates manipulation, allowing the poll designer to “manufacture the public attitudes they desire and that polls are merely a tool in this process of manipulating public opinion” (Jacobs, 1995, p. 519; Lippmann, 1955, 1993). Strategically released poll results may influence election outcomes (Restrepo, et al., 2009). Electoral regulations in many countries attempt to mitigate the powerful persuasive effect of poll results by prohibiting the dissemination of results immediately before voting begins (McAllister & Studlar, 1991). Inattentive citizens unacquainted with issues may employ reporting of poll results as cues facilitating choices or structuring opinions (Boudreau, 2009; Kam, 2005; Popkin, 1991). The desire to balance cognitive states drives the reaction of people to information: information at odds with present attitudes leads to cognitive imbalance, an uncomfortable psychological state (Festinger, 1957; Heider, 1946).

Attitudes constitute “a learned predisposition to respond to an object in a consistently favorable or unfavorable way” (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975, p. 6). Attitudes can be significantly reinforced when external confirmation addresses previous beliefs (Merton, 1968). “Ideas take up new validity when they are independently expressed by another, either in print or conversation” (Hookway, 1985, p. 36). Increased exposure to confirming material enhances reinforcement from exposure to external confirmation (Zajonc, 2001; Zimbardo, Ebbesen, & Maslach, 1977; Zimbardo & Leippe, 1991). Evidence congruent with current belief systems commands enhanced potential for generating attitude change. “Evidence that arouses hostile attitudes will be less effective than evidence that arouses favorable attitudes” (Wall Jr, 1972, p. 116).

While an attitude by definition constitutes predisposition to respond, propensity alone does not motivate action. In a model of reasoned action four factors mediate the transition of an attitude into an action: the attitude must be strongly held; it must be relevant to the behavior; the attitude and the behavior must have strong links with identical components of the attitude system; and the attitude must be salient for the individual (Zimbardo & Leippe, 1991).

Ajzen and Fishbein (1980; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) placed behavior firmly within the context of social interaction, resulting in three factors predictive of behavior: strength of intention to execute actions; convictions concerning outcomes resulting from actions; and relationship to social norms based on perceived approval/disapproval of prominent others.

Voters, for example, have been known to use polls predicting probable turnout and probable results to guide decisions (Scheufele & Moy, 2000). The potent argumentative power of such polls is evident. The rhetorical use of guerrilla polls can be understood based upon understanding the importance in establishing normative beliefs, reinforcing existing beliefs, creating the perception of shared beliefs, and establishing dissonance to prime individuals to recast attitudes.

Research design

Dispersion of the Syrian guerrilla poll can be studied in two ways. First, commonly available search engines generate a comprehensive picture of diffusion and treatment across the Internet. Second, language employed by webpages reporting poll results may indicate the degree to which results were subjected to critical analysis as opposed to reiteration of the findings. The purpose of the analysis is to determine the degree to which Syrian guerrilla polls were distributed utilizing a variety of media, including the Internet.

Metrics particular to the Syria polling performed by Democracy Council can be generated using the Google search engine. Google developed the largest searchable corpus on the planet (Shei, 2008). Google proprietary software, generally called a web crawling robot, collects data from every accessible Internet site connected to the World Wide Web. While the metaphor of a robot or spider traversing the strands of the Web may be a useful way to conceptualize the scope of information acquisition, it creates a misleading impression that an entity actually travels seeking information. The Googlebot performs a sophisticated series of simultaneous calls to pages on the Web, downloads any responsive pages into a database, and then indexes the documents in the database. A Google search looks through the index (Blachman, n.d.). The searchable corpus exceeds 10 trillion words ("Linguistics," 2005).

Google can be employed to explore frequencies of large collocations. Collocation describes the assemblage of word groups commonly used together (Shei, 2008). Studying patterns becomes important because words map onto certain patterns which embody meaning (Hunston & Francis, 2000). In a broader sense, a large collocation of terms reflects non-critical duplication of information. Using a large specific search term in Google should determine the frequency with which a term is used in the web. Results generated by searches of very large specific terms ($n > 10$) generates lists of websites that contain a large unique string.

Various search strings, identified in Table 1, were developed. A random sample of the websites listed by the Google search engine was taken after the searches. The sites were examined to determine if information had simply been copied. Random numbers were generated using the SISA random number generator (Uitenbroek, 1997). The numbers generated were rounded to the nearest whole number and then used to identify the URL to be checked.

Table 1: Search strings and expected results

Search string	Expected return
"guerrilla polling"	Websites containing the exact string <guerrilla polling>
"guerrilla polling" Syria	Websites containing the exact string <guerrilla polling> and the term <Syria> anywhere
"guerrilla polling" Korea	Websites containing the exact string <guerrilla polling> and the term <Korea> anywhere
"guerrilla polling" Korea -Syria	Websites containing the exact string <guerrilla polling> and the term <Korea> but not the term <Syria>
"guerrilla polling" Syria -Korea	Websites containing the exact string <guerrilla polling> and the term <Syria> but not the term <Korea>
"Autocratic regimes, by their nature, tend to view the opinions of their populations as a threat to be stifled."	Websites containing the exact whole string < Autocratic regimes, by their nature, tend to view the opinions of their populations as a threat to be stifled> For simplicity, this string will be called "massive search term 1."
"Syria may be the most difficult country in the world to conduct a public opinion poll. But a guerrilla polling team did just that, publishing a survey today that attempted to gauge national opinion in the country - and it's bad news for the regime of President Bashar al-Assad."	Websites containing the exact whole string < Syria may be the most difficult country in the world to conduct a public opinion poll. But a guerrilla polling team did just that, publishing a survey today that attempted to gauge national opinion in the country - and it's bad news for the regime of President Bashar al-Assad.> For simplicity, this string will be called "massive search term 2."
http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/11/25/want_to_know_what_north_koreans_think_about_kim_jong_un	Websites containing either the whole URL < http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/11/25/want_to_know_what_north_koreans_think_about_kim_jong_un > or a hyperlink coding the URL

The term <Korea> included in the search checked accuracy. Since the original *Foreign Policy* article bore the headline “Want to Know What North Koreans Think About Kim Jong Un?” (reporting a different poll using cell phones in North Korea) inclusion of the term allowed tracking of articles using the original story compared to stories solely about Syria.

Standards of conduct and practices for public opinion polling established by the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR, 2010) and the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research., 2009) provided benchmarks for analyzing validity of the poll methodology.

Results

Comparing the methodology described in the poll reports or comments accompanying release of the reports with generally accepted standards for public opinion polls shows extreme variance from standards. Table 2 compares accepted poll standards to the guerrilla poll report statements.

Table 2: Comparison between poll design and accepted standards

Standard poll*	Guerrilla poll
“[A]void practices or methods that may harm, endanger, humiliate, or seriously mislead survey respondents or prospective respondents.” AAPOR I.A.1.	2010 and 2011 Reports: “Concerns for safety of data collectors and survey respondents meant that a truly national representative sample based on random selection was not possible.” FP: “... high risks to both the data collectors and the survey respondents....”
“College or university Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) approve proposals for research involving human subjects and take actions to ensure that any research is carried out appropriately and without harming research participants.” ICPSR p.29	No discussion of IRB in any report. Although FP says poll conducted by Democracy Project, the institutional participants admit, “We’ve been intimately involved in the effort....” 2011 Survey Report discloses existence of data-collection manual developed in collaboration with “outside expert pollsters,” presumably the university researchers.

	CNN: Identifies the 2011 survey as “a poll conducted by Pepperdine University....”
<p>“[I]nclude ... in any report of research results or make them available immediately upon release of that report....</p> <p>1. Who sponsored the research study, who conducted it, and who funded it, including, to the extent known, all original funding sources.” AAPOR III.A.1.</p> <p>“[M]ake no false or misleading claims as to a study’s sponsorship or purpose, and we shall provide truthful answers to direct questions about the research.” AAPOR I.A.3.</p>	<p>No statement in any report as to where Democracy Council acquired funding.</p> <p>CNN: “The group receives funding from the U.S. government agency USAID, although the Syria poll was not commissioned by the government.” No statement identifying sponsorship.</p>
<p>“[I]nclude ... in any report of research results or make them available immediately upon release of that report....</p> <p>2. The exact wording and presentation of questions and responses whose results are reported.” AAPOR III.A.1.</p>	<p>2011 Survey Report: “... field staff were required to strictly adhere to an oral script.” No script released. Report references data-collection manual. No manual released.</p> <p>Unclear whether appendix includes exact wording of questions and responses.</p> <p>No data on presentation of questions.</p>
<p>“[D]escribe our methods and findings accurately and in appropriate detail in all research reports, adhering to the standards for disclosure specified in Section III. AAPOR II.B</p>	Methods described without specificity.
<p>“[I]nclude ... in any report of research results or make them available immediately upon release of that report....</p> <p>3. A definition of the population under study, its geographic location, and a description of the sampling frame used to identify this population. If the sampling frame was provided by a third party, the supplier shall be named. If no frame or list was utilized, this shall be indicated.” AAPOR III.A.1.</p> <p>“All reports of survey findings issued for</p>	<p>2010 Survey Report: “Data-collection field staff were trained by a professional statistician via Skype seminars.” The supplier is not named.</p> <p>2011 Survey Report: “Data collectors were trained in how to select respondents with the aim of collecting data representative of the Syrian population.”</p> <p>FP: “The fieldworkers were guided by Syrian statisticians and demographers....”</p>

<p>public release by a member organization will include the following information: ... Population that was sampled (for example, general population; registered voters; likely voters; or any specific population group defined by gender, race, age, occupation or any other characteristic)." NPP Level 1 Disclosure</p>	<p>Suppliers not named. Moreover, no similar disclosure is in the actual report.</p> <p>No description of population sampled.</p> <p>No sampling frame disclosed in either report.</p>
<p>"[I]nclude ... in any report of research results or make them available immediately upon release of that report.... 4. A description of the sample design, giving a clear indication of the method by which the respondents were selected (or self-selected) and recruited, along with any quotas or additional sample selection criteria applied within the survey instrument or post-fielding." AAPOR III.A.4.</p> <p>"[R]espondents are chosen by the research organization according to explicit criteria to ensure representiveness, rather than being self-selected." ESOMAR p.5</p>	<p>No sample design disclosed.</p> <p>No clear indication of method used by data collector to recruit respondents.</p> <p>No explicit criteria established.</p> <p>FP: "This does raise a concern that survey results might be skewed to those who are more politically minded."</p> <p>2010 and 2011 Reports: "... [A] truly national representative sample based on random selection was not possible."</p> <p>2011 Report: "... [T]hose agreeing to participate in such an exercise, without host government approval, would be inherently more likely to express anti-government sentiment."</p> <p>FP: "...men outnumbered women 2 to 1...."</p>
<p>"[I]nclude ... in any report of research results or make them available immediately upon release of that report.... 5. Sample sizes and a discussion of the precision of the findings, including estimates of sampling error for probability samples and a description of the variables used in any weighting or estimating procedures." AAPOR III.A.5.</p> <p>"[I]nclude ... in any report of research results or make them available immediately upon release of that report.... The discussion of the precision of the findings should state whether or not the</p>	<p>No discussion of precision of findings in either report.</p> <p>No estimate of sampling error in either report.</p> <p>No margin of sampling error in either report.</p> <p>2010 and 2011 Reports: "... [A] truly national representative sample based on random selection was not possible."</p> <p>2011 Report: "... [T]hose agreeing to</p>

reported margins of sampling error or statistical analyses have been adjusted for the design effect due to clustering and weighting, if any.” AAPOR III.A.5. “All reports of survey findings issued for public release by a member organization will include the following information: ... Margin of sampling error (if a probability sample).” NPP Level 1 Disclosure	participate in such an exercise, without host government approval, would be inherently more likely to express anti-government sentiment.”
“[I]nclude ... in any report of research results or make them available immediately upon release of that report.... 7. Method and dates of data collection.” AAPOR III.A.7.	No method of data collection other than statement that collectors were trained, spoke Arabic, and selected “with the aim of collecting data representative of the Syrian population.”
“In addition, in the case of face to face interviewing, the number of sampling locations should be given as an indication of the adequacy of sample design.” ESOMAR p.18.	No sampling locations identified in either report.

*Standards resources: AAPOR Code of Professional Standards and Ethics (AAPOR, 2010); ICPSR Guide to Social Science Data Preparation Best Practices (Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research., 2009); ESOMAR/WAPOR Guide to Opinion Polls (European Society for Online Marketing Research/World Association for Public Opinion Research, 2010); Council on Public Polls Principles of Disclosure (National Council on Public Polls, n.d.). 2010 Survey Report (Hawken et al., 2010); 2011 Survey Report (Hawken et al., 2011); Foreign Policy (FP) November 25, 2011 (Hawken & Leighty, 2010). CNN (Labott, 2011).

Numerical values for the number of webpages identified by Google searches using the search strings appear in Table 3.

Table 3: Number of webpages identified per search string

Search term	Results
“guerrilla polling”	1,040
“guerrilla polling” Syria	749
“guerrilla polling” Korea	665
“guerrilla polling” Korea -Syria	168
“guerrilla polling” Syria -Korea	230
Massive search term 1	96
Massive search term 2	649
Hyperlink	218

Analysis

Although the poll fails to report significant information regarding sampling, predictability, error, or reliability, the *Foreign Policy* article engenders an illusion of scientific sampling by implying that selection of individuals to survey was guided by statisticians and demographers. "The fieldworkers were guided by Syrian statisticians and demographers to ensure that the data collected were representative of the Syrian population" (Hawken & Leighty, 2010). The actual poll report, by contrast, makes no mention of "Syrian statisticians and demographers." The only professional referenced in the 2010 published methodology is a "professional statistician" using Skype to train field staff. The statistician is not identified.

The methodology never states explicitly how a sample was obtained, allowing the inference that interviewers made the selection: "Data collectors were trained how to select respondents..." (Hawken et al., 2010, p. 5). No specific information in the report details the training has been provided in the report. Although the Data Preparation guide developed by the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) calls for disclosure of data collection instruments and forms, these documents have not been released (Maynard & Timms-Ferrara, 2011, p. 27).

The 2011 report admits that authorizing paid interviewers to select subjects with no specified sampling plan resulted in bias favoring anti-government sentiment (Hawken et al., 2011, p. 6). The pollsters conceded the bias problem to CNN. "Those who agreed to answer a poll conducted without government approval may be more likely to express anti-government sentiments than their neighbors who refused," Hawken said, adding that it was hard to tell how representative the numbers were of overall public opinion in Syria" (Labott, 2011). The survey report admits the impossibility of random selection because of dangers to data collectors and respondents while asserting without explanation that weighting responses achieved competent results (Hawken et al., 2010, p. 5). Unweighted and weighted values to each question are disclosed in an Appendix. Nowhere does the poll report describe a methodology for weighting the data or cite any justification for the type of weighting used. By contrast, the Data Preparation guide developed by the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research mandates disclosure of "weight variables, how they were constructed, and how they should be used should be presented" (Maynard & Timms-Ferrara, 2011, p. 27).

Weighting, properly applied, improves accuracy when a confirmed relationship exists between the variable to be weighted and the data. One of the features of the Syria poll, as touted by Democracy Council, is that no such poll had ever been attempted previously. The absence of prior data describing relationships undermines appropriate weighting. Weighted average, weighted regression, or unweighted regression controlling for X comprise statistically competent methods for massaging samples, although each has unique problems. "Creating practical weights requires arbitrary choices about inclusion of weighting factors and interactions, pooling of weighting cells and truncation of weights" (Gelman, 2007, p. 163). The pollsters do not disclose the choices made or the manner of weighting. Neither poll report calculates sampling error,

margin of error, or standard deviation. ICPSR metadata standards contemplate a discussion of “whether standard errors based on simple random sampling are appropriate, or if more complex methods are required” (Maynard & Timms-Ferrara, 2011, p. 27). No discussion appears in the report. The poll is framed as a scientific survey, although it is more characteristic of a straw poll employing less stringent design methodologies and sampling self-selection (Nancarrow et al., 2004).

Despite manifest problems with the poll, an extensive public relations effort created an impression of adherence to scientific standards. The announcement of the poll in *Foreign Policy* trumpets that “a small cadre of pollsters is using new technologies and practices” and, later, “new technology greatly assisted in the training process” (Hawken et al., 2010). The invocation of advanced technology enhances perceptions of legitimacy. The only reference to sampling problems in the *Foreign Policy* article implies that science could rescue a faulty poll design when the flaw emanates from civil discord. “Due to the unique circumstances under which the survey was conducted, it did face some hurdles that required us to make some adjustments to achieve a representative sample of the population” (Hawken & Leighty, 2010). Readers of the popular article authored by the pollsters are not told, as the 2010 report admitted, that “a truly national representative sample based upon random selection was not possible” (Hawken et al., 2010, pp. 4–5).

Foreign Policy states that the Democracy Council engaged an outside research team in the United States to prepare an “independent survey report” weighting data to synthesize a product “nationally representative based on age, sex, location, religion, and education” (Hawken & Leighty, 2010). Angela Hawken, co-author of the *Foreign Policy* piece and leader of the team preparing the “independent survey report,” does not report either her membership on The Democracy Council board of directors or that the NGO’s website lists her as one of seven “Key Team Members” (“Democracy Council | Who We Are,” n.d.).

Conclusion

The pollsters present results as if they represented public opinion. “The Syrian people do not have confidence in the Assad regime. They no longer want to live in the Baath security state,” Democracy Council President James Prince told CNN when asked about the poll. “A little more than 86% of the respondents judge al-Assad’s performance negatively, and 88.2% do not think the current government is capable of solving the country’s problems, Prince explained” (Labott, 2011). Prince does not explain the impossibility of determining whether the 86% of respondents share the opinions of an equal percentage of the populace.

Public opinion polls reported in the media objectify a declaration of the beliefs held by society in a manner that appears scientific. Syrian readers of the 2011 poll now have metrics to weigh personal beliefs: 71.1% identify with protestors; 88% believe that most people sympathize with protestor’s issues (Labott, 2011). Release of a flawed poll takes advantage of the fact that media overemphasize the accuracy of polls while

underemphasizing defects and bias (Franklin, 2003; Igo, 2007; Jackman, 2005; Lau & Redlawsk, 1997). People do not distinguish between accurate and inaccurate polling reports (Boudreau & McCubbins, 2010). The temptation dangled before Syrians by the polls enables “the power of the polls to set benchmarks against which people can assess their own beliefs and inclinations ...” (Bogart, 1991). The benchmarks may indicate to Syrians that sympathy with dissidents constitutes a norm. Exposure to information implying that personal attitudes regarding the uprising are congruent with popular opinion alleviates cognitive imbalance, allowing the position to be adopted (Festinger, 1957; Heider, 1946).

A benchmark reassures supporters and demoralizes opponents (Nancarrow et al., 2004, p. 644). Syrians quietly sympathetic with dissidents may become more vocal upon learning they are in the majority, based upon the stories regarding the poll (Nancarrow et al., 2004; Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Biased polls employed argumentatively “are merely a tool in this process of manipulating public opinion” (Jacobs, 1995, p. 519). Poll results have been widely and uncritically publicized in print. Attitudes congruent with the poll “take up a new validity” (Hookway, 1985, p. 36).

Comments by Democracy Council’s team advance an argument that change is possible. Belief that action will result in a favorable outcome constitutes a major factor identified by Fishbein and Ajzein (1975) as predictive of behavior. People act on beliefs if they perceive that action will result in change. The CNN story on the second poll reports that an overwhelming majority – 90% - believe that conditions will improve. (Labott, 2011b). One of the critical findings in the 2011 poll showed that “78.3% feel more hopeful about the prospect for reforms in Syria in light of popular movements elsewhere in the Arab world” (Hawken et al., 2011).

Two factors govern attitude formation and subsequent behavior. Evidentiary verification of previously held beliefs (Merton, 1968) and the perception of congruent opinions of others (Bandura, 1986; Framing, Walker, & Lopyan, 1982) strengthen beliefs. The polls in Syria create a benchmark for gauging the opinions held by the rest of society while simultaneously confirming beliefs. Individuals suppress opinions that do not comport with dominant views, increasing the perceived saliency of dominant beliefs, making the dominant view appear transcendently authoritative when reported in the media; failure to conform to the dominant view risks social isolation (Manaev, Manayeva, & Yuran, 2010; Noelle-Neumann, 1974). The polls studied here create the impression that the dominant belief supports dissent. People who believe in the congruency of their attitudes with the majority become more vocal; those in the minority tend to become less courageous, further undermining the saliency of their views (Gonzenbach, King, & Jablonski, 1999). Thus, an opinion *portrayed* as dominant can, over time, actually become dominant (Scheufele, et al., 2001).

The analysis of the Democracy Council polls demonstrates that they are unreliable. It is not possible to determine whether defects in the poll were intentional. Circumstantial evidence, based upon the dispersion of the poll results and unwarranted conclusions drawn from the survey in media statements, allow an inference that the poll acted as a

persuasion piece to influence opinion rather than a survey instrument measuring opinion. Further research into motives and use of the poll is warranted. It is not clear that the poll was disseminated within Syria, for example, except to the extent that it was available through the Internet.

Resources:

AAPOR. (2010). *American Association for Public Opinion Research Code of Professional Ethics and Practices (Revised May 2010)*. Deerfield IL. Retrieved from http://www.aapor.org/AAPOR_Code_of_Ethics/4249.htm

Ajzen, I., & Fishbein, M. (1980). *Understanding attitudes and predicting social behavior*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, [1980].

Ansolabehere, S., & Iyengar, S. (Oct-Dec 1994). Of Horseshoes and Horse Races: Experimental Studies of the Impact of Poll Results on Electoral Behavior. *Political Communication*, 11(4), 413–430.

Bach, J., & Stark, D. (2002). *Link, Search, Interact: The Co-Evolution of NGOs and Interactive Technology* (Working paper, Center on Organizational Innovation). New York, NY: Columbia University. Retrieved from http://http://www.coi.columbia.edu/.stage/pdf/bach_stark_lsi.pdf

Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Prentice-Hall series in social learning theory. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Blachman, N. (n.d.). How Google Works. *GoogleGuide*. Retrieved November 27, 2011, from http://www.googleguide.com/google_works.html

Bogart, L. (1991). The pollster & the Nazis. *Commentary*, 92(2), 47.

Boudreau, C. (2009). Closing the Gap: When Do Cues Eliminate Differences between Sophisticated and Unsophisticated Citizens? *Journal of Politics*, 71(3), 964–976.

Boudreau, C., & McCubbins, M. D. (2010). The Blind Leading the Blind: Who Gets Polling Information and Does it Improve Decisions? *Journal of Politics*, 72(2), 513–527.

Cull, N. J. (2010). Public diplomacy: Seven lessons for its future from its past. *Place Branding & Public Diplomacy*, 6(1), 11–17. doi:Article

Democracy Council | Who We Are. (n.d.). Retrieved November 18, 2011, from http://www.democracycouncil.org/who_we_are.html

European Society for Online Marketing Research/World Association for Public Opinion Research. (2010). *ESOMAR/WAPOR Guide to Opinion Polls*. Amsterdam Netherlands: ESOMER. Retrieved from <http://www.esomar.org.pl/index.php/esomar-waporguide-to-opinion-polls.html>

Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Evanston, Ill., Row, Peterson [1957].

Fishbein, M., & Ajzen, I. (1975). *Belief, attitude, intention, and behavior: an introduction to theory and research / Martin Fishbein, Icek Ajzen*. Addison-Wesley series in social psychology. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., [1975].

Framing, W. J., Walker, G. R., & Lopyan, K. J. (1982). Public and private selfawareness: When personal attitudes conflict with societal expectations.

Franklin, C. (2003). Polls, Election Outcomes and Sources of Error. *Conference Papers -- American Association for Public Opinion Research* (p. N.PAG). Presented at the Conference Papers -- American Association for Public Opinion Research.

Gelman, A. (2007). Struggles with survey weighting and regression modeling. *Statistical Science*, 22(2), 153–164.

Gonzenbach, W. J., King, C., & Jablonski, P. (1999). Homosexuals and the Military: An Analysis of the Spiral of Silence. *Howard Journal of Communications*, 10(4), 281–296. doi:10.1080/106461799246762

Hardy, B. W., & Jamieson, K. H. (2005). Can a poll affect perception of candidate traits? *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Polling Politics, Media, and Election Campaigns, 69(5), 725–743.

Hawken, A., Kulich, J., Grunert, J., Kimbro, L., & Abu-Hamdeh, S. (2010). *Survey Findings: Syria 2010 Public Opinion Survey* (Poll report prepared for The Democracy Council of California) (p. 40). Malib: Pepperdine University. Retrieved from http://www.pepperdine.edu/pr/images/press-releases/2010/august/Syria_Survey_Report_August_5_final.pdf

Hawken, A., Kulick, J., Leighty, M., & Kisse, J. (2011). *Survey Findings: Syria 2011 Public Opinion Survey* (Poll report prepared for The Democracy Council of California) (p. 60). Malibu: Pepperdine University. Retrieved from http://www.pepperdine.edu/pr/releases/2011/september/Syria_2011_09_23_Final_with_cover.pdf

Hawken, A., & Leighty, M. (2010, November 25). Want to Know What North Koreans Think About Kim Jong Un? *Argument*. Foreign Policy. Retrieved November 20, 2011, from

http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/11/25/want_to_know_what_north_koreans_think_about_kim_jong_un

Heider, F. (1946). Attitudes and cognitive organization. *The Journal Of Psychology*, 21, 107–112.

Hookway, C. (1985). *Peirce / Christopher Hookway*. The Arguments of the philosophers. London ; Boston : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985.

Hunston, S., & Francis, G. (2000). *Pattern grammar: a corpus-driven approach to the lexical grammar of English*. Studies in Corpus Linguistics. Amsterdam [u.a.]: Benjamins.
Igo, S. E. (2007). *The averaged American: Surveys, citizens, and the making of a mass public*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. (2009). *Guide to social science data preparation and archiving best practice through the data life cycle*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: ICPSR, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan,. Retrieved from <http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/files/ICPSR/access/dataprep.pdf>

Jackman, S. (2005). Pooling the polls over an election campaign*. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 40(4), 499–517. doi:10.1080/10361140500302472

Jacobs, L. R. S. (1995). Presidential manipulation of polls and public opinion: The Nixon administration and the pollsters. *Political Science Quarterly*, 110(4), 519.

Kam, C. (2005). Who Toes the party Line? Cues, Values, and Individual Differences. *Political Behavior*, 27(2), 163–182. doi:10.1007/s11109-005-1764-y

Labott, E. (2011, September 27). Syrian poll finds optimism for future, but little support for Assad. *Democracy Council*. Retrieved November 18, 2011, from http://www.democracycouncil.org/media-events/syria_survey_2011.html

Lang, K., & Lang, G. E. (1984). The Impact of Polls on Public Opinion. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 472, 129–142.

Lau, R. R., & Redlawsk, D. P. (1997). Voting Correctly. *American Political Science Review*, 91(3), 585–598.

Linguistics: Corpus colossal. (2005, January 20). *The Economist*. Retrieved from http://www.economist.com/node/3576374?story_id=3576374

Lippman, W. (1955). *Essays in the Public Philosophy*. Little, Brown.

Manaevev, O., Manayeva, N., & Yuran, D. (2010). The “spiral of silence” in election campaigns in a post-Communist society. *International Journal of Market Research*, 52(3), 319–338.

Maynard, M., & Timms-Ferrara, L. (2011). Methodological disclosure issues and opinion data. *Journal of Economic & Social Measurement*, 36(1/2), 19–32.

McAllister, I., & Studlar, D. T. (1991). Bandwagon, underdog, or projection? Opinion polls and electoral choice in Britain, 1979-1987. *Journal of Politics*, 53(3), 720.

Merton, R. (1968). *Social theory and social structure* (1968 enl. ed.). New York: Free Press.

Mutz, D. C. (1992). Impersonal Influence: Effects of Representations of Public Opinion on Political Attitudes. *Political Behavior*, 14(2), 89–122.

Nancarrow, C., Tinson, J., & Evans, M. (2004). Polls as Marketing Weapons: Implications for the Market Research Industry. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 20(5/6), 639–655.

National Council on Public Polls. (n.d.). NCPP Principles of Disclosure. Retrieved November 29, 2011, from <http://www.ncpp.org/?q=node/19>

Noelle-Neumann, E. (1974). The Spiral of Silence: A Theory of Public Opinion. *Journal of Communication*, 24, 43–51.

Popkin, S. (1991). *The reasoning voter: communication and persuasion in presidential campaigns*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Restrepo, J., Rael, R., & Hyman, J. (2009). Modeling the influence of polls on elections: a population dynamics approach. *Public Choice*, 140(3/4), 395–420. doi:10.1007/s11127-009-9427-x

Roth, L. W. (1984). Public Diplomacy and the Past: The Search for an American Style of Propaganda (1952-1977). *Fletcher Forum*, 8(2), 252–396.

Salamon, L. M. (1994). The Rise of the Nonprofit Sector. *Foreign Affairs*, 73(4), 109–122. doi:10.2307/20046747

Scheufele, Dietram A., & Moy, P. (2000). Twenty-Five Years of the Spiral of Silence: A Conceptual Review and Empirical Outlook. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 12(1), 3–28.

Scheufele, D. A., Shanahan, J., & Lee, E. (2001). Real talk: manipulating the dependent variable in spiral of silence research.

Shei, C.-C. (2008). Discovering the hidden treasure on the Internet: using Google to uncover the veil of phraseology. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 21, 67–85. doi:10.1080/09588220701865516

Tull, D. S. (1975). Intentional Bias in Public Opinion Polls for Decisional Purposes. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 39(4), 552.

Uitenbroek, D. G. (1997). *SISA Binomial*. Southampton: D.G. Uitenbroek. Retrieved from <http://www.quantitativeskills.com/sisa/distributions/binomial.htm>

Wall Jr, V. D. (Spring1972). Evidential Attitudes and Attitude Change. *Western Speech*, 36(2), 115–123.

Zaharna, R. . (2010). *Battles to bridges U.S. strategic communication and public diplomacy after 9/11*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Zajonc, R. B. (2001). Mere Exposure: A Gateway to the Subliminal. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 10(6), 224–228.

Zimbardo, P. G., Ebbesen, E. B., & Maslach, C. (1977). *Influencing attitudes and changing behavior: an introduction to method, theory, and applications of social control and personal power*. Topics in social psychology. 2d ed.

Zimbardo, P. G., & Leippe, M. R. (1991). *The psychology of attitude change and social influence*. McGraw-Hill series in social psychology. New York, NY England: McGraw-Hill Book Company.

About the Author

Michael Jablonski, J.D., is a Presidential Doctoral Fellow in the Transcultural Conflict and Violence program at Georgia State University. Mr. Jablonski's varied legal career over the past 25 years encompassed representation of political officials. He is the General Counsel for the Democratic Party of Georgia. He holds degrees in Economics (1974) and Law (1977) from Emory University.