



“Visual Bubblegum”—Dial-In TV Polls Spark Debate Among Broadcasters

by Mike McLaughlin

This regular feature of Insight examines how the news media—newspapers, television and radio—cover public affairs in North Carolina. In this issue, Insight examines the dial-in poll, in which television viewers pay 50 cents to dial a 900 number and register their yes or no opinion on a question posed during a television newscast.

Should U.S. Attorney General Ed Meese resign? Should the admission by Douglas Ginsburg of marijuana use disqualify him from consideration as a Supreme Court Justice? And what about a state lottery for North Carolina? Yes or no?

These are questions Tar Heel broadcasters have thrown to their viewers in dial-in polls—opinion tallies in which viewers are charged 50 cents a pop to talk back to their televisions by dialing one of two telephone numbers to register a yes or a no vote. An AT&T computer tabulates the number of yes phone calls and no phone calls and the tally is fed back to the television station for on-the-air reports. There is no chance to elaborate on one's opinion or even to say a single word. The computer places the caller in the correct category based on the phone number the viewer dials.

It isn't science, and broadcasters tell their viewers as much. But it's like the health warning on a package of cigarettes—they still want to sell the product. The dangers are misinformation and confusion about the opinions of North Carolinians on sensitive public policy issues and erosion of credibility for those who conduct their polls according to the exacting standards of social science.

Still, the polls have proliferated to the point that every North Carolina resident with a television set is likely to be able to tune in to a station that flashes a pair of 900 numbers across the screen in hopes of enticing viewer participation in the newscast. Of the 17 commercial television stations across North Carolina that feature at least a half hour each of evening and late night news, eight reported using the polls as a regular feature. A ninth station, WECT in Wilmington, dropped the dial-in polls in January 1988 because they were not generating enough response to justify their cost, says Bob Keefer, WECT assignment editor.

But costs were rarely cited among editors and news directors charged with making decisions on whether to use the polls. Dial-in polls are cheap compared to public opinion studies in which random samples are drawn so that the results can be generalized to represent the views of a larger population.

AT&T charges a \$250 start-up fee for initiating the service. If the poll generates at least 500 calls—and most do—there are no additional charges. Stations are charged 25 cents for each call short of the break-even point. If a poll generated only 300 calls, for example, the station would be faced with an additional charge of \$50.

Stations can also make money if the response is strong enough. AT&T reimburses stations on a sliding scale that begins at 2 cents for each call

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above the 2,000 call mark and goes up to 5 cents a call for every response above 20,000 calls. While the reimbursement rate sounds paltry compared to the phone company's take, WITN in Washington rang up \$600 in revenue in a March 1987 poll. Viewers were asked whether they favored a state holiday celebrating the birthday of slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. and more than 20,000 responded, says news director Jim Bennett.

But despite the potential for a kickback, dial-in-poll users say making money is not their intent. "Dial-in polls are not revenue makers for WSOC-TV," says Mark Casey, executive producer of the Charlotte station's 11 p.m. news. "Such polls are not identified as revenue makers. Such polls are not designed to produce revenue. Very simply, making money has never and never will be a consideration in producing a dial-in poll."

Proponents of dial-in polls also say they are not intended to be scientific and are not presented as such. News directors who use the polls say they take pains to point out during the newscast the limitations of the poll, although most say they have heard of instances of abuse—cases in which disclaimers are inadequate or are omitted. They defend the polls as a means of enhancing viewer interest and participation in the newscast. A viewer who dials in a vote during the 6 p.m. news is likely to tune-in again at 11 p.m. to catch the results. "It's a way to get the viewer to talk back," says Casey. "So often we just bombard people with information. Very rarely do we ask them what they think."

News directors say the disclaimers they use with the polls inform viewers that the results are unscientific and represent only the opinions of viewers who call in a vote. At the same time, they say the polls help them get a feel for issues their audiences feel strongly about. "I just think it gives us a way of showing what some of our people are thinking," says

Connie Howard, news director at WRAL in Raleigh. "I can't go away saying 50 percent of the people in the WRAL viewing area feel this way. If I had \$10, I could call as many times as I wanted to."

"It identifies an issue on the national, international, state, or local level that is hot enough—touches people enough—to make them get up off the chair and pick up the telephone and give their opinion," says WSOC's Casey, who points out his station also conducts scientific public opinion surveys—five of them in 1987 alone. "I want to stress that dial-in polls were never intended to replace the scientific survey. They are intended to give the viewer instant, talk-back contact with a news program. The dial-in is designed for viewer interaction. It puts into action the viewer's often mut-

North Carolina Commercial Television Stations That Conduct Dial-in Polls

| Station | Location | Conduct Dial-in Polls | |
|----------|--------------------|-----------------------|----|
| | | Yes | No |
| 1. WBTV | Charlotte..... | | X |
| 2. WSOC | Charlotte..... | X | |
| 3. WCTI | New Bern..... | | X |
| 4. WECT | Wilmington..... | | X |
| 5. WFMY | Greensboro..... | X | |
| 6. WGHP | High Point..... | X | |
| 7. WHKY | Hickory..... | | X |
| 8. WITN | Washington..... | X | |
| 9. WKFT | Fayetteville..... | | X |
| 10. WLOS | Asheville..... | X | |
| 11. WNCT | Greenville..... | | X |
| 12. WPCQ | Charlotte..... | | X |
| 13. WPTF | Raleigh..... | X | |
| 14. WRAL | Raleigh..... | X | |
| 15. WTVD | Durham..... | | X |
| 16. WWAY | Wilmington..... | X | |
| 17. WXII | Winston-Salem..... | | X |

Note: WUNC Television, the state's leading public television station, carries news and public affairs programming but does not conduct dial-in polls. Stations included in the table were those that feature at least a half-hour each of evening and late night news.

Table prepared by Mike McLaughlin.

tered response to a medium that constantly speaks to [the viewer]."

Casey sets up dial-in polls for the Carolina News Network, which includes WSOC, WRAL, WFMY in Greensboro, WWAY in Wilmington, and WLOS in Asheville. He says successful polls often feature an ideologically charged issue that touches the emotions of viewers. For example, more than 10,000 viewers registered their votes when asked in an October 1987 poll whether the Senate should confirm Judge Robert Bork, President Reagan's first choice to fill the vacancy created on the Supreme Court by the retirement of Associate Justice Lewis Powell. A notable flop came later that same month when viewers were asked whether Dick Crum should resign as football coach at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "Our worst was Dick Crum's future at UNC," says Casey. "We pulled less than 500 calls. Nobody cared enough to get up and spend 50 cents."

As is the case at most stations, Bennett of Washington's WITN follows a strategy to assure that the dial-in polls generate viewer interest. The poll is announced during the noon broadcast. Reporters then collect sidewalk interviews on the same subject which are aired along with early poll results during the 6 p.m. newscast. Viewers get reminders about the poll and the phone numbers to dial throughout the evening. The final results are broadcast at 11 p.m. "You've got to tease it," says Bennett. "You've really got to promote it pretty heavily to get the proper response."

Critics among North Carolina broadcasters cite the amount of promotion required to conduct a successful dial-in poll as one of its chief drawbacks. "It takes up valuable time that could be used [for] more news stories," says Dave Davis, news director at WTVD in Durham. A feature package built around a dial-in poll can take two to three minutes. That's a significant chunk out of a half-hour broadcast.

Jim Ogle, news director at WGHP in High Point, says he has aborted scheduled dial-in polls when more important news has developed. "We don't run them on days when we've got major stuff going," says Ogle. "I'm not going to run visual bubblegum when people come to the table for a full-course meal." But Ogle concedes that once a poll is underway it must be completed, or else the station will face a host of angry viewers when they get their telephone bills. There is a potential for a dial-in poll to devour news time when a major story breaks after a poll has already started.

And some news directors say they believe that

Polling Checklist

Here are some points to consider when evaluating the merits of a poll:

1. who paid for the poll;
2. when the polling was done and any events that might have affected polling results at that time;
3. how the poll was taken—by telephone, mail, or in person;
4. the population surveyed and screening questions, such as those used in a political poll to identify likely voters;
5. the size of the sample and, where the survey design makes it relevant, the response rate;
6. some indication of the allowance that should be made for sampling error;
7. the treatment of sub-groups in the sampling process—e.g., under-representation of women and blacks; and
8. the actual wording of the poll's questions.

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despite the disclaimers, many viewers confuse the dial-in polls with scientific public opinion samples. They say including the dial-in polls in a newscast lends them undue credibility. "No matter how carefully you couch the information you present in the polls, I suspect the overwhelming impression the audience is left with is this is a scientific opinion poll and should be given the same weight in assessing public opinion," says Mark Mayhew, assistant news director at WXII in Winston-Salem. "They are not designed to be accurate. All they do is muddy the waters, and there's enough misinformation out there as it is." Many television stations spend thousands of dollars on polls that do follow the guidelines of social science research. Some do not like to spend their credibility on polls that fall short of the mark.

"People assume that because it is on the TV news there is some kind of built-in accuracy to it," says WTVD's Davis. "They lend their credibility to something that probably doesn't deserve it."

Some critics also question the use of news time to promote a moneymaker for AT&T. "The tele-

phone company provides the service to you," says Bill Knowles, news director at WCTI in New Bern. "They set it up and they reap the benefits. I just don't like it because it costs something from the viewer, and it's going to the telephone company. And they're just the middleman."

Ron Laughlin, state AT&T public relations manager, concedes the service is a moneymaker but says most of the 50 cents charge to viewers represents fixed costs. These include the cost of setting up the lines and of tabulating the results and providing them to television stations, as well as local telephone company access charges.

The key to getting an accurate public opinion sample is making sure that every member of a population being surveyed has a chance of being selected.¹ This is called random sampling, and without it, the results cannot be presented legitimately as representative of a larger population.² Because viewers decide whether to participate in a dial-in poll, the concept of random sampling is abandoned. That means there is no need to bother

with the basics of reporting poll results, such as sample size, margin of error, and confidence level. It also means the results are meaningless beyond their face value.³ (For more on what to look for in a good scientific poll, see box on page 65.)

"There is no way to tell whether any given dial-in poll is representative or not," says Phil Meyer, a Kenan Professor of Journalism at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and former research director for the Knight-Ridder newspaper chain. "It might be, and it might not be." Meyer says the biases inherent in the dial-in poll are similar to those of the clip-out survey sometimes used by newspapers. "There is a strong probability of over-representation of people for whom time is not a heavy cost, such as retired people and bored housewives," he says. "It takes 50 cents, and it takes some effort."

Meyer, who has published a number of scholarly articles on journalistic ethics and is vice president of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, says he sees no ethical problem with using the polls as long as stations include a promi-

Viewers Veto Dial-In Poll

Dial-in polls are a prominent part of many North Carolina newscasts, but do viewers want them? In at least one instance, when a television audience got to vote on the question, the answer was a resounding no.

In April 1983, an aggressive *Charlotte Observer* media critic took aim at WBTV's dial-in poll, a feature in which viewers were posed a question and asked to dial one of two telephone numbers flashed on the screen to register either a yes or a no vote.

Mark Wolf, in a column on television and radio, charged that one edition of the poll had been misrepresented as "decisive" on whether Charlotteans favored a nuclear freeze.¹ Wolf said the poll actually was "about as scientific as standing in the middle of Tryon Street (one of Charlotte's main streets) and asking people to shout their opinions out the window." He said viewers should be told the primary purpose of the poll was to boost ratings so the station could increase its advertising rates.

WBTV threw the issue to its viewers in an appropriately unscientific manner—it conducted another dial-in poll. Viewers were asked, "Do you think [Channel] 3's Poll is a worthwhile part of this newscast?"

"The overwhelming response to it was no," says Bill Foy, the station's current news director.

The *Observer*, in an article measuring about two column inches, reported the vote as running two to one against the poll, with 63 percent of viewers voting no.²

That was the "kiss of death" to 3's Poll, says Foy.

Of course, there was nothing scientific about the vote, but then isn't that the case with every dial-in poll?

—Mike McLaughlin

FOOTNOTES

¹ Mark Wolf, "Without Scientific Methodology, WBTV's '3's Poll' Lacks Meaning," *The Charlotte Observer*, April 7, 1983, p. 9-B.

² "Viewers Reject '3's Poll' in Poll," *The Charlotte Observer*, April 9, 1983, p. 13-A.

nent explanation of their worth in predicting public opinion. "As long they are doing it just for fun and it's clear that it's just for fun, I don't think there is anything wrong with it," says Meyer. "Once you begin generalizing and say this poll proves such and such a thing, then you've crossed the line. I think it's better if it is used for a frivolous question, because that way it's much less likely that the consumer will be misled. It's hard to use it on a serious subject and then convince people it should be taken frivolously."

Others in academic circles are less tolerant of dial-in polls. "They're absolute junk," says Prof. Seymour Sudman, immediate past chairman of the Standards Committee of the American Association for Public Opinion Research. "They have no redeeming value at all. If the public recognized they are absolute trash it would be OK, but many people believe they have valid meaning."

Sudman says when news organizations have conducted comparison polls using social science research techniques in conjunction with dial-in polls on the same subject, the results have been "hugely different."

ABC News, for example, conducted a dial-in poll on the question, "Should the United States take strong action against the Soviets?" for shooting down a Korean passenger plane and killing 269 people in August 1983. More than 236,000 viewers called to register their opinions, and about 94 percent favored strong action. In a scientific poll conducted by the network the same night, however, 83 percent of those surveyed favored strong action against the Soviets.⁴

"The results have absolutely no relationship to public opinion," says Sudman. Because responding to the polls costs money, Sudman says there is a built-in economic bias. He also points out there are no safeguards to prevent viewers from calling more than once. "The ideologues and so on—people who feel very strongly about their viewpoint—are likely to jump in and try to win," he says. Interest groups may also misrepresent the results of the polls even when they are presented properly on television.

Sudman says the association has taken no formal action regarding use of the polls but encourages reputable news organizations to steer clear of them. "We're sensitive about issues of free speech," says Sudman, "but we try to persuade any rational user of this thing not to do it. People find it interesting, but there's just no reality."

Mayhew, of Winston-Salem's WXII, says dial-in polls should be avoided by North Carolina broadcasters, although he does not believe use of the polls

should be restricted.⁵ "I feel TV shows should be free to follow their own editorial judgment," says Mayhew, "but I'm pleased that the station for which I work no longer does them." ☐

FOOTNOTES

¹ Seymour Sudman, immediate past chairman of the Standards Committee of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, says what is necessary for a legitimate public opinion poll is that every member of a population being sampled have a known, non-zero chance of being selected and that weighting be used to adjust for unequal probabilities.

² A shortcoming of every telephone poll is that not everyone has a telephone and those without a phone cannot participate. This is true of dial-in polls as well as other telephone polls that use scientific sampling techniques. Southern Bell provides telephone service to the majority of North Carolina residents, and a spokesman says about 89 percent of the households within the company's service area have phones. Southern Bell's definition of household includes nursing home rooms, college dormitory rooms, and the like.

³ Sample size is the total number of respondents who participate in an opinion poll. Margin of error is the range the results of an opinion poll may vary at a given confidence level from the actual division of opinion within the population being sampled. For example, a poll with a sample size of 500 carries a margin of error of plus or minus 4 percent at the 95 percent confidence level, meaning that in 95 of 100 samples drawn, the results would lie within 4 percentage points of the true value in the population. For more on opinion polls, see *North Carolina Insight*, October 1984, Vol. 7, No. 2, pp. 2-14.

⁴ "Punishing the Soviets—What U.S. Options?" ABC News Nightline transcript, Sept. 2, 1983, Show No. 605, pp. 10-11.

⁵ The North Carolina Association of Broadcasters says it has taken no position on whether dial-in polls should be used in television newscasts.

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