

STRAW POLL JOURNALISM AND QUANTITATIVE DATA

The case of *The Literary Digest*

Dominic Lusinchi

In 1936, The Literary Digest poll made a disastrous forecast: President Roosevelt would lose the election. George H. Gallup, one of the founding fathers of modern polling, believed the magazine could have avoided this outcome. The only thing the Digest had to do, he said, was to perform a "simple statistical correction" on the data. But Gallup was speaking from the point of view of an occupational creed foreign to the journalistic standards that informed the straw poll journalism practiced by The Literary Digest and other news publications in those days. This paper argues that new journalistic norms (e.g. "impartiality") were the principal obstacle in the dissemination to the sphere of straw poll journalism of an emerging statistical technology, whose purpose was to evaluate and correct the raw data obtained by polls. The research shows that news-workers of that era did not view "statistical correction" as a legitimate journalistic practice. As a result, polling became, for many years thereafter, the specialty of experts outside the field of journalism.

KEYWORDS data adjustment; diffusion; journalistic ethos; quantification; straw polls

Introduction

In 1972 George H. Gallup published a book entitled *The Sophisticated Poll Watcher's Guide*. In it he wrote: "One of the ironies of polling history is that the *Literary Digest* had the evidence in hand to make a correct forecast in the 1936 presidential election" (Gallup 1972, 162).¹ *The Literary Digest* poll had erroneously, and uncharacteristically, predicted a commanding win on the part of the loser. According to the magazine, Alf Landon, the Republican challenger, was slated to receive 54 percent of the popular vote, while the incumbent president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR), would get only 41 percent. In reality, Roosevelt was easily re-elected to a second term with 61 percent of the votes cast. Partly as a result of this, the publication, which had successfully run presidential "straw" polls since 1916, folded two years later (*Time*, May 23, 1938). Gallup, among others, intimated that the *Digest* could have avoided this outcome had it performed a "simple statistical correction" (163) on the data it published.

Unlike "scientific" polling, "straw" polls in the early decades of the twentieth century were exclusively a *journalistic* enterprise.² Although by no means the only periodical to pursue this activity, *The Literary Digest* poll was seen as the flagship of straw polling. It stretched the art to its limits; it is no wonder then that the *Digest's* demise marked the death knoll of straw polls—at least, as a *legitimate* method of collecting information. One consequence was that journalists gave up polling, which became the exclusive domain of *specialists* outside news organizations; these, in turn, became mere buyers of the product brought forth by scientific pollsters and their successors. By late 1936, for example, 70 news periodicals already subscribed to Gallup's weekly polls (*Newsweek*, November 14,

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1936). It is only much later in the century that polling reappeared as an in-house activity operated by news organizations.

In a sense this study is about an episode in the history of the diffusion (in this case non-diffusion) of quantification into yet another occupation—journalism. The process, marked by controversy, was a slow one. This should not be surprising; after all, news reporting is an essentially literary craft with its own very distinctive style: e.g. the “inverted pyramid”,³ which one editor called “the fundamental rule of news writing” (as quoted in Vos 2002; Schudson 1990, chap. V). In this paper I show why the *Digest* did not avail itself of techniques to process quantitative information (poll results), despite the fact that others, contemporaries outside the field of journalism, did so freely. The downfall of straw polls after the 1936 presidential election marked also the ascendancy of scientific polls in the late 1930s and in the 1940s. In the first section, I provide a short summary of the *Digest*’s polling career. Then, I describe the way the *Digest* conducted its polls and contrast it with the modern approach to polling, i.e. methods that emerged around the mid-1930s. In the third section, I discuss the data-analytic technique Gallup suggested the *Digest* could have used to adjust its polling data, and which he relied on for his own polls. Next, I identify factors that reinforced the *Digest*’s journalistic treatment of polling data and its disregard for the statistical approach. Finally, I review conditions associated with the process of diffusion.

The Literary Digest Poll (1916–1936)

A weekly magazine, launched in 1890, *The Literary Digest*’s first venture into opinion polling took place in 1916, when it informed its readers that it would be conducting a “straw vote” about the coming presidential race and asked them to report which candidate was favored in their community (*Literary Digest*, September 16, 1916). Its last poll took place during the 1936 presidential campaign.

During its polling career (1916–1936), the *Digest* conducted both electoral and issues polls. In all, it fielded six presidential polls (1916, 1920, 1924, 1928, 1932, and 1936), one mayoral poll (New York City, 1933), one gubernatorial poll (California, 1934), and seven issue polls: three on Prohibition (1922, 1930, and 1932), one on a proposal to award World War I veterans a financial Bonus (1922), one on the Mellon tax proposal (1924), and two on New Deal policies (1934 and 1935).

The 1922 poll on Prohibition and the Bonus award is the first that was based on a truly national sample. The magazine mailed out more than 10 million ballots (*Literary Digest*, July 8, 1922).⁴ In 1924, the *Digest* conducted two polls: one, early in the year (February to April), on the Mellon tax plan (February 2, 1924), and the second on the presidential contest (September 13, 1924). Both polls involved mailing 15 million ballot-cards. In the 1924 presidential poll, respondents were asked not only their candidate preference for the upcoming election, but who they had voted for in 1920. This was also done in subsequent presidential polls (1928, 1932, and 1936), and in the 1935 poll on New Deal policies. To establish its national sample list, which it updated periodically, the magazine relied mostly on telephone books and car registrations rolls (Robinson 1932, 56) and supplemented these with “rosters of clubs and associations”, “city directories, lists of registered voters, classified mail-order and occupational data” (August 22, 1936). It was also very careful to check for duplicates (November 3, 1928).

TABLE 1Response rates to *The Literary Digest* polls: 1924–1936

Year	Topic	Ballots mailed	Ballots returned	Response rate (%)
1924	Tax reduction	15,186,808	2,134,444	14.1
1924	Presidential	16,646,706	2,386,052	14.3
1928	Presidential	17,131,776	2,236,450	13.1
1930	Prohibition	20,227,370	4,806,464	23.8
1932	Prohibition	20,706,352	4,668,537	22.5
1932	Presidential	20,000,000	3,064,497	15.3
1934	New Deal	15,000,000	1,772,163	11.8
1935	New Deal	10,000,000	1,907,681	19.1
1936	Presidential	10,000,000	2,376,523	23.8

The ballots mailed for the last four polls listed are rounded figures as reported by *The Literary Digest*.

Source: *The Literary Digest*; Willcox (1931, 244).

Response rates to *Digest* polls between 1924 and 1936 were low: they varied, depending on the topic, between 12 and 24 percent⁵ (Table 1). The number of ballots mailed by the *Digest* would be considered, nowadays, a huge waste of resources. The magazine never mailed less than 10 million ballots and always received more than 1.5 million returns. If we assume that response rates are an indicator of interest in the topic of the poll, then Prohibition and the 1936 presidential contest attracted the most attention.

The *Digest* prided itself on the accuracy of its presidential polls: the magazine publicized this over and over again (*Literary Digest*, July 15, 1922; October 11, 1924; October 6, 1928). Until the presidential election of 1936, it never erred by more than five points, at the national level. It even felt that its Prohibition polls were vindicated by the repeal of the Volstead Act in 1933 (November 4, 1933) (Table 2).

By the time the *Digest* announced, in July of 1936, that it would conduct yet another presidential poll, it had acquired a solid reputation as being fair and “uncannily” accurate. Its “poll machinery” (*Literary Digest*, February 27, 1932) even made it twice to the silver screen on Movietone News.⁶

TABLE 2The *Literary Digest*'s record of accuracy for presidential elections

Year	Winning candidates				Prediction error (%)
	Percentage received		Candidate		
	<i>Digest</i>	Actual	<i>Digest</i>	Actual	
1924	56.5	54.0	Coolidge	Coolidge	2.5
1928	63.3	58.1	Hoover	Hoover	5.2
1932	56.0	57.4	Roosevelt	Roosevelt	1.4
1936	40.9	60.8	Landon	Roosevelt	19.9

The “actual percentage received” refers to the popular vote. *The Literary Digest* percentages are based on the counts published by the magazine.

Source: *The Literary Digest*; U.S. Bureau of the Census (1970, 354).

Polling: Old and New

Starting in 1924, every poll followed the same pattern. The *Digest* announced the poll either before or shortly after the first ballot-cards were sent out or soon after the first returns came in. As ballots arrived daily in the *Digest's* mail room, they were immediately enumerated, and the cumulative results were published weekly, until the final tally, thus giving readers the opportunity to follow changes in favor or against an issue or candidate. This roughly resembles what today's American public is accustomed to during election season. But what news consumers get these days are *completed* polls that attempt to assess any shift within the voting public over time. The *partial* results presented weekly by the *Digest* were simply a function of when the ballot-cards had reached a given region of the country and how quickly they were returned.

Nowadays, a news organization reports the *final* poll results only. In the case of the *Digest*, and other "straw" polls of that era (e.g. the *Farm Journal*), both *partial* and *final* results were published. From the time it announced the start of the 1936 presidential poll in its August 22 issue until it revealed the final cumulative results on October 31, the magazine provided its reader with nine poll reports. These had the advantage of keeping the suspense going and, hopefully, selling more copies of the periodical: "I get a clicking kick out of the weekly forecasts", wrote one reader from Seattle (*Literary Digest*, July 11, 1936). Furthermore, these partial results were commented by numerous newspapers throughout the nation, and mentioned on the radio (May 3, 1930), thus providing the *Digest* with much publicity and prestige.

From the point of view of a modern polling organization, this approach would be considered pure folly. In our day and age multiple *distinct* polls are published over a period of several months: the partial results that trickle in during the field period are completely hidden from the public. In fact, the self-proclaimed "scientific" pollsters (Archibald Crossley, George Gallup, and Elmo Roper) that appeared on the American media scene in 1935 had already adopted this methodology. For example, in 1936, Gallup's American Institute of Public Opinion conducted no less than six separate presidential polls during the time ballots were returned to the *Digest* (Cantril and Strunk 1951, 591).⁷

As in the past, the final results of the 1936 *Digest* presidential poll were reported in the issue that came out the weekend before Election Day (October 31, 1936). They were presented, *in the raw*, by state, in a tabular format that showed not only the respondents' choice in the upcoming election, but how they had voted in 1932; there was also a column for those who either did not vote or declined to indicate who they had voted for in 1932. Again, a modern poll taker would scoff at the *Digest's* naïve approach to sample data. Indeed, it can be said that the straw poll journalist's end-product is the modern pollster's raw material.⁸ This is the critical difference between straw poll journalism and modern polling. Suffice it to say here that what the "scientific" pollsters of that era provided, and what we get from their successors today is a product that is "finished, polished, and packaged" (Goffman 1959, 44). How the data are transformed from their original state to their published state is largely invisible to the poll consumer. This behind-closed-doors alchemy has not been without its critics throughout the years (Ginzburg 1944). One commentator called this system of "cooking though not crooking" the data "mysterious" (Alsop 1960, 174). In contrast, as the editors wrote: "A *Digest* poll has no secret from the public" (*Literary Digest*, May 14, 1932).

To understand the *Digest's* approach to reporting poll data (news) and contrast it to what we are now accustomed to with modern polls, we must place the magazine within

the *journalistic style* it espoused. During most of the nineteenth century in America, the dominant characteristic of journalism, when it came to political reporting, was one of *partisanship*: the “news” was presented in a manner that showed one’s preferred political party in the best of light and one’s opponent in the worst (Kaplan 2006; Ryfe 2006; Schiller 1979). Lack of political devotion was viewed, by some, as deviant behavior. “The man who thinks that both [political parties] are equally bad”, a newspaperman of the day affirmed, “and who does not care which prevails, is a man without opinion, or without principles, or without perception, and in either case is wholly unfit to be an editor” (as quoted in McGeer 1986, 116). In the midst of this environment, there emerged, slowly and mostly after the Civil War, an “independent” commercial press that was not beholden to party politics. According to historian Michael McGeer, “by 1890, 25 percent of the more than 9000 Northern weeklies stood before the public as independent papers” (120).

One of the credos of the independent press was that the readers should be given the necessary information to allow them to make up their own minds, as opposed to following slavishly the party line. “The people now think for themselves and what they ask of the editor is simply a text of fact” (as quoted in McGeer 1986, 119), the *New Haven Evening News* stated in 1882. A parallel principle was that news should be fact-based, especially during election season: “The duty of all newspapers at such a time as this”, asserted the independent Newark *Evening News*, referring to the presidential election of 1884, “is to give the people the latest news without coloring or bias” (119). To put it more generally, as Gaye Tuchman did: “The emphasis on news was an emphasis upon fact” (Tuchman 1978, 159). This creed was most eloquently expressed shortly after the Civil War by the Associated Press’s correspondent in Washington, DC: “My business is merely to communicate facts. My instructions do not allow me to make any comments upon the facts which I communicate ... I do not act as a politician belonging to any school, but try to be truthful and impartial. My dispatches are merely dry matters of fact and detail” (as quoted in Mindich 1998, 109).

The *Digest* functioned wholeheartedly within this journalistic doctrine. Over and over again, it reminded its readers that the news provided by its poll was factual and impartial. To assert the credibility of their enterprise, it was critical that they let the numbers “speak for themselves” (*Literary Digest*, October 16, 1920): “we supply our readers with the facts to the best of our ability, and leave them to draw their own conclusions” (November 5, 1932). We will return to these issues later.

“Statistical Adjustment of Data”⁹

What was Gallup talking about when he referred to a “statistical correction” that the *Literary Digest* could have used on its poll data? The method consists in weighting the cell counts of a contingency table of poll results, so that the table’s marginal totals conform to known benchmark values (Deming [c1943] 1964). In the case of the 1936 *Digest* poll’s final sample, one would cross-classify reports of voting preference in 1932 with those in the current election. The known entity is how the electorate voted in 1932. If the final sample of the 1936 poll is an unbiased representation of the voting public, then the marginal distribution of candidate preference for the 1932 election as reported by current (1936) respondents should be similar to the actual results of that election. In other words, the distribution of 1936 respondents who had voted in the previous presidential election should approximate the 1932 results. Instead, based on the report of the 1936 poll participants,

Hoover would have been re-elected in 1932 with 52 percent of the two-party vote. In reality, Roosevelt won with 59 percent. In order for the *final* 1936 sample to reflect the actual outcome of the 1932 election, the “statistical correction” would have weighted down Republicans and weighted up Democrats.

This operation is called *post-stratification weighting* by survey statisticians. It is used when some subgroup in the population has been deliberately over- or under-sampled (disproportionate sampling), and also to correct imbalances in the final sample due to non-response and other non-sampling errors (Wainer 1989, 124–125). This type of data “cooking” is routine nowadays and is performed once the field period is over; the raw sample is then compared to a number of benchmarks, usually, in the case of a general population survey, Census data or the *Current Population Survey*. But could the *Digest* editors have known of this tool for use on their own data?

Next, I discuss the social conditions that allow a technique, such as the statistical method just discussed, to diffuse from an external source to a host culture (e.g. the *Digest*).

In order for a new product, whether physical or intellectual, to be adopted, certain conditions have to be met. First and foremost, and perhaps trivially, the item has to have been invented (or reinvented); simply put, it has to exist. Second, one must be aware of its existence. Third, one must become familiar with its use and purpose, in other words, one must understand its “appropriateness and worth” (Strang and Meyer 1993, 489): what it is for and how one uses it successfully. Finally, it has to be accepted as *legitimate*: it must not clash with the established norms of the potential user-group: i.e. there must be compatibility between “the receiving culture and the innovation” (Katz, Levin, and Hamilton 1963, 250).

When *did* this technique come to be? Although, it is impossible to pinpoint its appearance, it is clear that it was around in the late 1920s and early 1930s. For example, Claude E. Robinson of Columbia University was the author of *Straw Votes* (1932), in which *The Literary Digest* polls featured prominently. He dedicated a large portion of Chapter V to the analysis of poll data. In it, he discusses several methods used to “interpret” (i.e. adjust) straw poll results, including the one referred to by Gallup, which he calls “party-to-party shift” (Robinson 1932, 120–122). Robinson had also employed this analysis technique in the pages of the *New York Times* (October 16, 1932) as he examined the partial results of the 1932 *Digest* poll.

A year later, in the pages of the *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, W. L. Crum, a professor of economics at Harvard, analyzed *Digest* poll results for the 1932 presidential election. He wrote: “The central operation in the present analytical interpretation of the *Digest* results consists in rectifying the figures so that they may be taken to apply to such a sample as would have been polled if each group, as determined by past preferences, had been proportionately covered” (Crum 1933, 153–154). In other words, he was adjusting the 1932 *Digest* sample based on how it reported having voted in 1928. Commenting on this procedure, he wrote: “I am not aware whether this method, or a similar method, had been worked out earlier. Similar methods may have been in use for a long time; and, in any case, have recently come into wide general use” (154). He also acknowledged the analysis that Robinson presented in his 1932 book. Furthermore, Crum had already conducted an analogous analysis on the 1928 *Digest* presidential poll in the *Wall Street Journal* (November 2, 1928).

A few years later, the *New York Times* (January 4, 1936) quoted Martin A. Brumbaugh, a professor of statistics at the University of Buffalo, who suggested that the latest *Digest*

poll on New Deal policies, which appeared in January of 1936, was biased because “a larger fraction of the Hoover voters than of the Roosevelt voters” were represented in the final sample. “To put it briefly”, he is reported saying: “too many of those who voted for Hoover in 1932 are sending in their ballots”. He argued in favor of an “adjusted result”, which would have given the New Deal a larger percentage than the one based on the raw data. In the days preceding the final results of the 1936 *Digest* poll, the *New York Times* published two letters to the editors, which illustrated the use of this statistical technique (October 16, 1936 and October 28, 1936). In the same daily a few months earlier, Hadley Cantril, a Princeton professor soon to be part of the elite of the polling profession, described how the technique was widely used by the new “scientific” pollsters. He wrote:

If the ballots are not returned in the correct proportion ... then returns are adjusted by the simple mathematical procedure of weighting—multiplying the actual number of ballots returned by a carefully calculated fraction in order to increase or decrease the number of ballots from a given population so that they will represent the right percentage of voters. This corrected figure, rather than the result actually obtained by counting the ballots, is taken as the final tally. (Cantril 1936)

Did the editors of the *Digest* know of this technique by the time they launched their 1936 presidential poll? They were well acquainted with Claude Robinson’s research. In the preface of his book, he thanks them “for their generous coöperation [*sic*] in placing their straw-vote records at [his] disposal” (Robinson 1932, xii). In return, the editors wrote: “*The Digest* knows the author well, and is glad to see his book out. Professor Robinson is a conscientious worker and has gone through our polling machinery and records like a mouse through a granary” (*Literary Digest*, October 8, 1932). Also, it appears that they actually read the book or some portions of it since it is quoted in the pages of the magazine (October 8, 1932 and October 29, 1932).

The editors were aware of Martin Brumbaugh’s critique of the 1935 New Deal poll, since they responded to it, to dismiss it, in the January 18, 1936 issue of the magazine. The *Digest*’s editors followed closely anything published in the *New York Times* about their poll, as evidenced by the numerous letters they sent to the editor (*New York Times*, October, 8, 1924; October 9, 1924; November 4, 1924; October 18, 1928; March 19, 1932; July 19, 1936). Therefore, they must have seen the various examples of data “corrections” mentioned earlier.

Although it is unlikely that the *Digest* editors would have read the *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, they probably did see Crum’s articles in the *Wall Street Journal*. In fact, news-workers’ primary reading material is other news-workers’ production: one must see what the competition publishes (Breed 1955). Being based in New York City, it is more than likely that the magazine’s editors read the local dailies and other periodicals very carefully.

Finally, in the issue of the magazine in which they sought to understand why their 1936 poll had gone so wrong, the editors indicated, yet again, that they were aware of the existence of this data-analytic technique: they refer to it as the “compensation ratio” or the “switch factor” (*Literary Digest*, November 14, 1936). Why did they mention it so explicitly at that time as they never had before? The 1936 poll was the first one to fail, and dismally at that, so it became eminently relevant to mention it then—if only to dismiss it.

Barriers to Adoption

From the evidence just presented, we can derive the following conclusions. Not only did *statistical adjustment of data* exist as an analysis technique at the time of the 1936 poll, but it was widely accepted and established in certain quarters. Indeed, none of the authors that use it or discuss it acknowledges someone as its originator, which is customary when one avails oneself of a recent invention. Neither the “scientific” pollsters, nor the other professionals who used the technique back in the 1930s were news-workers; the latter were mostly academics, and, in the case of Robinson and Cantril, a mixture of academic and fledgling pollster.¹⁰ Among the academics, the individuals in question were in disciplines not even remotely related to the news reporting business.

Thus, in terms of the four adoption criteria mentioned earlier, the first two are fulfilled: the technique existed and the editors were aware of it. In contrast, the other two (*appropriateness* and *legitimacy*) are not. To understand why this is so, I examine two types of factors that were obstacles to the diffusion of the methodology into the domain of straw poll journalism: those endogenous to the news profession and those exogenous to it, but which worked to reinforce the former. The first have to do with the *occupational rules* that informed the editors’ professional identity as news reporters—their professional *ethos*. The second are connected to the poll’s history of success, and the mixed messages the editors received regarding the poll’s validity.

As journalists, the editors of the *Digest* reported the news as it became available: this is one of the defining characteristics of the profession—one of its most fundamental tenets. Holding back on the news would have done violence to their professional ethics.¹¹ The approach adopted by the new generation of statistically minded poll professionals would have done exactly that. As Elihu Katz points out: “The less upsetting an innovation—the lower its cost—the more likely its adoption” (Katz 1999, 150). For the *Digest*, the cost of waiting until the weekend before the election to report the results of its poll would have been high both professionally and financially.

But, most importantly, this technique requires tinkering with the “facts”—the raw data from the poll. This was inconceivable as it would have been seen as a violation of their professional neutrality and fairness, the hallmarks of the impartiality the *Digest* editors were so keen to uphold (Schudson 1990, 345, footnote 73). As mentioned before, American journalism was slowly emerging from an era, encompassing most of the nineteenth century, in which newspapers were first and foremost advocates of a political cause (Kaplan 2006; Ryfe 2006). Indeed, for most of the “news” providers of that time period, partisanship was emblematic: a paper, almost by definition, was a party organ (McGeer 1986, 131). This applied also to the “straw” polls published by those papers (Trankard 1972; Smith 1990; Herbst 1995). In contrast, a new generation of news reporters was seeking to present the “objective” truth not the partisan “truth” of old. Thus, it mattered greatly to the editors of the *Digest* to maintain a reputation of impartiality and non-partisanship: neither they nor their poll could be accused of favoritism—“not for any party or cause”, they stated emphatically (*Literary Digest*, April 30, 1932; see also October 28, 1916 and April 12, 1930). When it came to reporting the facts, they were, as they wrote themselves, above suspicion: “The *Digest’s* neutrality has the quality required of Caesar’s wife” (April 19, 1930 and April 16, 1932). This affirmation was used both as a shield and as a means to enhance the credibility of the *Digest* poll in a journalistic environment where “objectivity” was yet to become the dominant norm (see Schudson [2001] on the “objectivity norm”).

This professional ethos, or “occupational creed” (Merton 1938, 326), informed the “hands-off” approach adopted by the *Digest* towards its poll data: “figures are exactly as received ... they are neither weighted, adjusted nor interpreted” (*Literary Digest*, October 31, 1936). It was a policy that the editors compared to “scrupulous bookkeeping” (November 14, 1936). The analogy is enlightening and expresses the essence of straw polls. The ethical undertone is clear: “accurate account-keeping”, as one scholar notes, has a “healthy disciplining effect” (Yamey 1949, 105), in contrast to the strident style of an earlier era (McGeer 1986). One does not “cook the books” translates into one reports the numbers as recorded—like it or not. The *Digest* editors believed their polls “to be a true reflection of public sentiment” (January 18, 1936): news is news and should not be tampered with in any way. “Correcting” the numbers as practiced by those who answered to statistical, not journalistic, imperatives, was not an option. How could the editors have justified that to their public? Such an approach to the “facts” was not part of their journalistic tool chest¹² because it was not (yet) integrated into their creed: it was beyond the pale. One of the major qualities that ensured the *Digest*’s high status among its peers, and the reading public, was its “impartiality”: tampering with the news would have compromised it, which, in turn, would have led to a serious loss of social approval.

Next, I examine the exogenous factors that contributed to the editors’ “failure” to adopt *statistical adjustment of data* to process their poll results. The *Digest* maintained confidence in their way of doing things while facing two types of criticism. On the one hand, the editors were accused of *ideological* bias as a function of whom or what their poll was favoring. For example, its Prohibition polls consistently showed that the respondents were averse to the legislation.¹³ Hence they were accused by the “drys” (supporters of Prohibition) of manipulating the data in favor of the “wets”. The *Digest* dismissed these critiques in an easy disdainful way. As the editors were in the habit of repeating, “The *Digest* takes no side on the dry–wet issue” (*Literary Digest*, May 14, 1932). If we can judge from the number of favorable commentaries printed in its pages from a wide variety of newspapers, the magazine had plenty of supporters to bolster its claim (e.g. May 10, 1930 and May 24, 1930).

The second type of criticism was of a more *methodological* nature. Experience in the form of “accurate” results, not only for electoral contests but on issues (e.g. Prohibition), had convinced the *Digest* editors that what they had was a reliable “polling machinery” that yielded “prophetic results” (*Literary Digest*, September 3, 1932). But there were skeptics. One critic believed that the *Digest*’s claims to accuracy were overblown—specifically if one looked at the poll results state by state (*New York Times*, October 15, 1928). This kind of rebuke always elicited a vigorous response from the magazine’s editors (e.g. October 19, 1928).¹⁴

But there was no consensus among the “figure experts”, as these critics were called by the *Digest* (*Literary Digest*, November 14, 1936). A case in point is Walter Francis Willcox, whom the magazine refers to as “this ‘Daniel come to judgment’ ... whose name invokes authority” (May 27, 1932). Willcox, a professor of economics and statistics at Cornell University, had been president of the American Statistical Association and chief of the division of methods and results at the Census Bureau (Leonard 2009). This “coldly impartial statistical expert who has no interest in anything but the exact truth” was quoted as saying that the *Digest* proved to be “a trustworthy mirror of public opinion”. Such reassuring words from “the dean of American statisticians” (October 1, 1932) were unlikely to prompt the *Digest* to revamp its whole *modus operandi*, or even perform any kind of statistical

adjustment of its poll results: “no variation whatever”, it declared solemnly, “can be allowed to creep into our highly organized and carefully evolved national polling system” (March 22, 1930).

The editors’ faith was founded on “that great mass of postcard votes, representing the opinions of every section, class, age and occupation will be found the answer” (*Literary Digest*, August 29, 1936). They believed that the ballots reached “all classes, occupations and political classifications” (February 2, 1924). Their creed was that their “polling machinery” was informed by impartiality and, therefore, could only yield unbiased (non-partisan) news (poll results). They interpreted criticisms of their poll as accusations of news misrepresentation; in other words, as attacks on their journalistic integrity.

Finally, the last of the exogenous factors is the poll’s track record. Simply put: it is hard to argue with success. For every poll that could be measured against actual voting results, the *Digest* got it right—at the national level. Whatever the poll’s shortcomings, they could not be very serious since its predictions were always correct—so the editors believed. Experience was plainly a barrier to change: it convinced them and many others that what they had devised was a “system” of “astonishing prophetic accuracy” (*Literary Digest*, March 8, 1930). What possible reason would they have to modify anything?

Discussion and Conclusions

This research took as its starting point a remark made in 1972 by George H. Gallup about what the reported results of the 1936 *Literary Digest* presidential poll could have been. Although much has been written about polling in the 1930s, not much has been said about the adoption (or lack of adoption) of modern statistical techniques by news organizations to process the quantitative data generated by their polls. After the *Digest*’s demise in 1938, polling was essentially left in the hands of specialized firms, and “scientific polling” prevailed. It can be said that the way news organizations circumvented the issue of “cooking” (Alsop 1960) the data was to rely on syndication (e.g. Gallup): i.e. divesting themselves of polling, which would now be run by “experts”. It is only in the 1970s that specialized polling units with a reach similar to that of the *Literary Digest* resurfaced in news organizations. By then straw poll journalism was long gone and a new paradigm was in place: statistical polling.¹⁵

Gallup’s comment is loaded with unstated assumptions. This study has attempted to demonstrate that what scientific pollsters, and others, took for granted was profoundly antithetical to the ways of *straw poll journalism*, which was the only mode of polling in the first third of the twentieth century, and the *Literary Digest* its most visible practitioner. Although seemingly in the same business (public opinion polling), the *Digest*’s editors and the new pollsters worked within two entirely different normative structures: the former were guided by the norms of *independent* journalism, which did not allow an item that was deemed as news (poll numbers) to be altered in any way; the latter were trying to transform polling into an activity based on principles derived from the relative new science of statistics. What qualified as *news* (raw poll results) for the former was, for the new pollsters, data whose crudeness required correction so as to make it presentable (fit for publication).

The central focus of this research has been these questions: Why did the simple data correction technique advocated by Gallup and others not diffuse to the *Digest*? Why did it not resonate with the magazine’s editors? Using a set of conditions suggested by Selvin

(1976), which complement those used earlier, I review the obstacles that prevented its diffusion to the *Digest*.

The first criterion is referred to as *channel*: “There must be some path of communication for the item or message to travel between the source and the potential adopters” (Selvin 1976, 45). As we saw, there were several sources (e.g. Crum, Robinson, Willcox) from which the message was communicated. The “path[s] of communication” were the venues in which the sources were published (e.g. well-known newspapers, radio); and, in addition, for one source (Robinson), direct contact with the editors of the magazine. Despite this, a major obstacle remained: the message had to cross occupational boundaries. All of the sources originated from outside the news profession. In other words, the providers (the “source”) and the potential adopters were members of two distinct occupational communities (“cultures”): each with its own sets of professional norms and beliefs. This makes it more difficult for the message to flow from the former to the latter: it is easier to be converted by a colleague than by an “outsider” (Peters 1995, 34).

The next two criteria are *comprehensibility* and *value consonance*: “The potential adopters must understand the message ... [and] perceive [it] as legitimate and useful” (Selvin 1976, 45). It is important not to interpret *comprehensibility* in this context as simply a cognitive concept (i.e. some degree of intellectual ability), but as an attribute that is socially determined: a prescriptive framework that demarcates what can be done, talked about, etc., and what cannot.

Clearly, the statistical approach to data processing did not appeal to the editors of the *Digest*: how could this methodology be in any way relevant to reporting the news? As a result, it could not be considered legitimate—as one scholar of the American press wrote: “the *Digest* was inclined to poke fun at ... the niceties of statisticians” (Mott 1930–68, 576). Moreover, *comprehensibility*, in this case, required specialized knowledge, and, as Tunstall (1970, 24) reminds us, “journalists are primarily generalists ... [they] emphasize ‘experience’, and other personal qualities, rather than specialized knowledge”. Specifically, *comprehensibility* required that the data be treated *statistically* not *journalistically*. In other words, *comprehensibility* is context-dependent: the journalistic culture within which the *Digest* functioned had imperatives (e.g. report the news as it becomes available; “impartiality”) which created an environment that was inhospitable to the treatment of data required by the statistical methodology practiced by Gallup and others. The two approaches were socially incompatible. Those informed by the tenets of the field of statistics subscribe to the belief that “raw data, like potatoes, usually require cleaning before use” (Ronald A. Thisted as quoted in Hand 2008, 36). This creed could not be further from that of the straw poll journalist for whom news should be reported as recorded.

The last criterion is *social support*: “There must be some social structure that will support and reward potential adopters for changing their ways” (Selvin 1976, 45). The only reference structure existing at the time was that of straw polls: the *Digest* and other publications engaged in that activity (e.g. *Farm Journal*, the Hearst newspaper chain). There was no publication that played the role of “opinion leader” (Katz 1957). If anything, the *Digest*, given its prestige at the time, was well-qualified to fit the part: it was the “opinion leader”. What the *Digest* received from its peers were praises, i.e. encouragement to keep up the good work, not admonishments to change its ways. In other words, these were sources of pressure to conform to socially validated practices that carried far more weight, because they originated from within the same community, than some methodology emanating from outside journalism. Had the *Digest* adopted the approach advocated

by these outsiders, it would have elicited moral indignation from its peers and the withdrawal of their social support, for it could only have been construed by them as fiddling with the “facts”. The prestige the *Literary Digest* poll had accumulated over the years, in the eyes of the public in general and the press in particular, resulted from two factors: its impartiality and its “accuracy” (its *aggregate* results were always congruent with reality). Prestige granted to the actor generates expectations on the part of the donor. Thus, it was incumbent upon the *Digest* to carry out the constitutive acts that defined it as an impartial (non-partisan, unbiased) news organization, thus upholding the image it projected on to its admirers.

These criteria are interdependent: when one goes unfulfilled, diffusion cannot occur. In this case, the absence of diffusion allowed the *Digest* to persist in its well-established procedures. This research shows that occupational practices, be they journalistic or of any other kind, are grounded in a social and cultural structure; they cannot be changed instantly just because some novelty is said to be “superior”, especially if the innovation originates from outside the field where it could potentially be applied.

We also see why scientific polling, the predecessor of statistical polling,¹⁶ could not have emerged from within straw poll journalism, but in opposition to it. Straw polling was the exclusive domain of the press and its practice was informed by the norms of independent journalism: the information it generated was treated like any other news item—with impartiality. After 1936, polling, which was now “scientific”, became the exclusive domain of specialists outside journalism. News organizations relinquished their control over polling, and instead became consumers not producers of polls. This process differed fundamentally from the transition that occurred towards the end of the nineteenth century, when partisan polling (Herbst 1995) was replaced by independent polling, both forms being the product of news organizations. This shift was simply part of the more general conversion that was taking place in the profession: discarding partisanship in favor of independence, impartiality, and “objectivity” (Schudson 1990, 3). In contrast, “scientific” polling, informed as it was by statistical principles, emerged from outside the journalistic profession and remained there for many decades. It displaced straw poll journalism, and came to be the dominant form of polling in the late 1930s and 1940s, until it had to reinvent itself after the 1948 presidential election.

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DEDICATION

In memory of my father, Victor (“Vic”) Lusinchi, who spent most of his career as a foreign correspondent and referred to himself simply as a “newspaperman”.

NOTES

1. Despite its name, *The Literary Digest* (1890–1938) reported primarily news—domestic and foreign; it also published literary works such as poems and short stories. It came out every Saturday and was headquartered in New York City.

2. By “scientific” polling, I refer to the public opinion polls conducted, starting in 1935, by firms led by Archibald Crossley, George H. Gallup, and Elmo Roper.
3. The “inverted pyramid” style of reporting stands in opposition to the classical chronological style. In the latter, the reader has to wait until the end of the story to find out what happens; in the former, what happened comes first (Mindich 1998, chap. 3).
4. The issue polls conducted after 1922 were dedicated to a single topic. (Postage for returned ballot-cards was paid by the *Digest*.) In late 1933, the *Digest* polled its readers on what they thought of the radio and radio programs (*Literary Digest*, January 6, 1934).
5. Even today, there is a wide divergence between principles or ideals and practice. Although, the Office of Management and Budget (2006, 8) has 70 percent as the lowest response rate mentioned, the reality is that many surveys, especially in the commercial sector, have rates similar to those of the *Digest* (on this issue, see Moore 2008, 121–129).
6. October 6, 1928 and March 4, 1930. I thank Professor Mark Garrett Cooper and Greg Wilsbacher (Curator, Moving Image Research Collections) of the University of South Carolina for allowing me to view the Movietone clips about the *Digest*. The statement about the *Digest*’s reputation is based on quotes from newspapers nationwide cited in the magazine (see *Literary Digest*, October 6 and November 24, 1928; March 8 and 22, 1930; February 13 and 20, 1932).
7. This includes the last Gallup poll published on November 1, 1936—the Sunday before the election. The Fortune (Roper) Survey conducted four presidential polls that year (*Journal of Educational Sociology* 1940, 251).
8. A notable exception to this rule appears to be a poll conducted in 1896, with the help of “eminent mathematicians”, by the *Chicago Record*, with mixed results. It did not have any followers and the publication itself does not seem to have continued along that path (Jensen 1980, 55).
9. This expression is the title of a book by the late American statistician W. Edwards Deming (Deming [c1943] 1964).
10. Robinson would go on to work for Gallup in 1938. Cantril created the Office of Public Opinion Research at Princeton in 1936. Other scholars discussed this technique in relationship with the 1936 *Digest* poll: Jerome Cornfield (1942, 63), Louis Bean (1948, 150), and Richard Link (1980, 55).
11. See, for instance, the *Digest* editor’s clear statement on the matter in a *New York Times* (October 9, 1924, 5) report subtitled “Tabulation of Literary Digest Poll Is Made as Ballots Are Received, Says [*Digest* editor] Woods”.
12. Other journalistic techniques, such as the *news interview*, which seem so “natural” and taken for granted nowadays, were not always so (Schudson 1995).
13. Ironically, the founders of the publication, Isaac K. Funk and Adam W. Wagnalls, were both Lutheran clergymen and dedicated prohibitionists.
14. During its polling career, the *Digest* had three editors: William Seaver Woods until 1933; Arthur S. Draper from 1933 to 1935, an advocate of “unbiased news” (*New York Times*, August 2, 1922); and Wilfred J. Funk, the son of the founder of the publication, from 1935 on.
15. By “statistical” polling I refer to the practice of selecting samples based on probabilistic principles (e.g. RDD, random digit dialing) and of processing the raw poll data statistically (e.g. post-stratification weighting) before publishing the results.

16. The history of polling in America has gone through several stages. Polling in the nineteenth century was mostly a partisan endeavor; independent straw polling came next; between 1935 and 1948, “scientific” polling was prevalent and relied on quota-sampling; finally, after 1948, statistical or probability sampling became the gold standard for polling and survey research. Perhaps, the advent of online polls, along with other factors (e.g. declining response rates) may very well mark a new stage in the history of polling.

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Dominic Lusinchi (author to whom correspondence should be addressed), Extension Department of Technology and Information Management, University of California Berkeley, USA. E-mail: dominicl@berkeley.edu. Web: <http://www.farwestresearch.com/staff/dl/dlcv.html>