

Opinion polls are an important source and subject of news stories. Newspapers and broadcasters often commission their own polls to provide information about readers' views or voters' intentions.

Opinion polls can be an effective tool in measuring what people think about issues, political parties and candidates. However, the public needs to be able to judge properly the value of polls. This requires that publications provide sufficient background information to prevent results from being misconstrued. Publications should take special care to do so in election periods.

Reports should not use language that overstates the possible interpretations or meaning of polls. Writers of opinion pieces and editorials should take care when referencing or interpreting polls to provide, where possible, context or information to enable readers to locate the poll results.¹

Space considerations may restrict the amount of background information that can be provided about a poll, but background information on at least a number of important details is desirable. This can be placed in the main body of an article, a footnote, another section that may be read separately or, if online, via a hyperlink.

Editors should take reasonable steps to ensure that reports about previously unpublished opinion poll results include, or have been written taking into account, at least the following matters:

- the name of the organisation that carried out the poll;
- the identity of any sponsor or funder²;
- the exact wording of the questions asked;
- a definition of the population from which the sample was drawn;
- the sample size and method of sampling³;
- the dates when the interviews were carried out.

Publications are also encouraged to consider including the following matters where possible:

- how the interviews were carried out (in person, by telephone, by mail, online, etc); and
- the margin of error.

Editors and reporters should carefully evaluate whether to report online surveys, having regard to their scope and methodology.⁴ They should be cautious of open-access online polls where the sample size and the exact questions asked are unknown and the results have been generated by self-selecting respondents.⁵

Reports should not imply that the views of panels or focus groups or vox pops and straw polls represent the views of an entire population or the electorate at large.

¹Adjudication No. 1636 (April 2015).

²Adjudication No. 1383 (January 2008)

³Adjudication No. 1636 (April 2015); Adjudication No. 1383 (January 2008).

⁴Adjudication No. 1383 (January 2008).

Relevant Adjudications

Adjudication No. 1636: Complainant/The Sunday Mail (April 2015)

<http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/apc/2015/13.html>

- Issue: poll referenced in an opinion piece – question of whether it would be interpreted by readers as fact
- “The text of the print and online material included the statement that ‘[o]ur Galaxy Poll today clearly shows that Queenslanders are embracing asset sales rather than reduce government services or increase taxes’”
- “The material did not provide any statistical results, methodology or other details of the poll. There was no reference to any place where such details might be found. An article on page 8 of the print version did not provide these details. A separate online article on the same day said the survey involved 800 Queenslanders and found ‘38 percent of people believed asset sales were the best option to reduce debt, compared to 21 per cent for increased taxes and 24 per cent for reduced services’.”
- “In this case, the unexplained and unqualified reference to the poll results relating to asset sales, government services and taxes was not distinguishable as the publication’s opinion about the meaning of the poll. The material was likely to be read as a statement of fact.”
- “The failure to indicate where detail of the poll findings and methodology could be found and the fact that the detail which was provided elsewhere did not enable readers to ascertain whether the statement in the material was opinion or fact, meant that relevant facts were not disclosed.”
- “Accordingly, the Council considers that the print material on page 54 and the online editorial were in breach of General Principle 6. It recommends that publications consider the Council’s Advisory Guideline on opinion polls which it issued in 2001.”
- General Principle 6 at the time was as follows:
 - “Publications are free to advocate their own views and publish the by-lined opinions of others, as long as readers can recognise what is fact and what is opinion. Relevant facts should not be misrepresented or suppressed...”

Adjudication No. 1556: Debra Creevy and others/Herald Sun (November 2012)

<http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/apc/2012/37.html>

- Coverage of Craig Thomson – ‘Pinocchio’
- Included online poll results from publication’s website
- “Page 7 consisted mainly of a section with the principal heading “The Reader Verdict”, above which was a heading “We asked our own jury if they believed Craig Thomson’s claims”. The names and photographs of each of twelve people were shown, together in each case with the heading “Don’t believe” (or, in two cases, “Can’t decide”) and a few sentences were shown as quotes of their views. The page also reported, under a heading, “What you said”, that of the 12,082 readers who replied to a poll on the newspaper’s website asking “Do you believe Craig Thomson was set up and did nothing wrong?” some 89% had answered in the negative.”
- “The Council has concluded, however, that the overall impact of the front page and page 7 was highly unfair to Mr Thomson by seeking to convey too close an analogy with a courtroom conviction on criminal charges, especially at a time when the laying of such charges was being widely demanded and anticipated. Accordingly, the complaints against the newspaper’s coverage are upheld on that ground.”

- “The website carried a report by Australian Associated Press (AAP) on a survey that claimed 70 per cent of consumers suspect they are being “ripped off” when they buy diamonds, and do not trust jewellers. A similar story was published on news.com.au (the News Limited news website).”
- “The JAA challenged the accuracy of the survey, complaining that it was an open-access, uncontrolled online poll for an industry operative with an interest in scaring consumers into having their diamonds independently appraised before purchase. The survey was conducted on behalf of the Diamond Certification Laboratory of Australia (DCLA), an internationally-accredited diamond grading company.”
- “AAP said it established that DCLA was a reputable organisation that would be expected to have a valid and authoritative view on the state of the diamond industry, but did not question the scope or methodology of the poll.”
- “While DCLA may well be an expert on diamonds, its Press Release did not state its own views about the honesty of jewellers, but rather those of an unknown number of people attracted to an online poll. AAP and/or smh.com.au should have questioned the methodology and depth of the survey so that their editors could make an informed judgment on whether or not to publish, or, if published, so that readers could form their own opinions as to its veracity. Having published the article the website should have offered redress to JAA when it became aware that the survey was an online poll.”
- “The Australian Press Council has clear guidelines on the reporting of opinion polls, of which AAP and smh.com.au should be well aware. They encourage editors to be cautious of open access online polls, where the sample size is unknown, the questions asked are unknown, and where the results have been generated by self-selecting respondents and not by proper statistical sampling.”
- “The guidelines on opinion polls, and on other sensitive issues, are accessible on the Council’s website, and are commended to all editors.”