



Corruption by numbers

Then there is the Omar Khadr case. While we are bombarded by opinion poll results that inform us of what the majority of Canadians think or don't think, the varying opinions put forward lead me to wonder as to the objectivity of each poll. Is the media taking (or do we) the time to think issues through in order to arrive at independent conclusions?

To illustrate my concern, consider the popular My Space, YouTube, X-Tube and other popular Internet sites: Divided into *Best Rated*, *Most viewed*, *Most discussed*, it is interesting to see that the category clips on view remain constant for weeks despite a deluge of daily posts. Visitors to these sites, by and large, don't have time to wade through the new stuff so they rely on what has already been voted as excellent. Again it appears as if the thinking process is being eroded in favour of what others have deemed best.

Another issue is the fact that Internet-site and search-engine rankings, notably Google, are often determined by cash or strategic marketing. How often do we look further than the first few hits? It is almost pathetic to see heads of state arrive at the podium with the same speech in hand—no doubt prepared yesterday by eager research assistants and speech writers who have fallen prey to the trap of devouring material that is more readily available.

We are fed daily yo-yoing opinion poll results as to the state of the economy, housing prices, stock markets, etc., so much so that we easily become overwhelmed and confused. It has also become commonplace to tout almost every new book, recording, film, etc. as an all-time best-seller depending on varying opinion polls and market research. Do we consider the source of these dizzying acclamations often enough?

Similarly, do Canadians regard government proposals to move to a voluntary StatsCanada census (that statisticians agree will mean less reliable data) as a non issue? Perhaps convenient and malleable opinion polls will be a solution that requires less work and less thinking.

True democracy is founded on

individual choice, freely expressed. This requires individual thought/introspection and questioning that unfortunately has never been a priority for the average person. Consequently the media, traditional and social, has the important responsibility of shaping public opinion.

Canada has the hard-earned reputation of a country that places huge importance on balance, fairness, justice and democracy. Our enviable place in the world depends on the traditional media, as things stand, to ensure that our inherent human belief in authority and desire for certainty is not betrayed.

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Is the media enslaved by opinion polls? Laurens van der Post wrote in his famous novel, *A Far-off Place*, written in the '70s, about corruption by numbers ... "our tendency is to allow collective values to become man's greatest values." He commented then that our own society and its meaning were drowning in "a flood of collectivism, mass solutions and abstractions of numbers."

In any well-ordered society it is perhaps inevitable that ethics, morality, education standards, law and best business practice reflect what is best for most people at any point in time. This reality should be tempered by another, allowing collective values to become prevailing societal values will swamp individuality and, ultimately, original and innovative input.

The recent Toronto mayoral election brought this to the fore. Opinion polls identified front-runners, stoked fear and appeared to paralyze free thinking. Blind acceptance of unverified poll results as absolute truth cleared the decks of all candidates but the supposed favourites. It was almost demanded that the *poll-unchosen* throw in the towel. Was the election outcome formed by the opinion polls?

Healthy cynicism prompts me to ask if herd manipulation was not a distinct possibility. With the advance of technology and automated distillation of facts and information we seem to have surrendered our individual thinking to what the polls feed us?

Is it not prudent to remember that humans create and utilize technology? During results coverage, the increased credence we afford opinion polls was underscored by a major news network having a representative of *Ipsos Canada* as the political analyst of the day.

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