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Do Pictures Bias Polls?

In a poll that Forum Research conducted June 25–28 of this year, 43 per cent of Torontonians backed a plan to spend \$30 billion on new subway and light rail transit lines funded by a property tax increase.

Another 43 per cent disapproved, and 14 per cent expressed no opinion.

A different poll, conducted June 28, found that 80 per cent supported the transit plan before hearing about its cost, while 67 per cent supported it after hearing it would be funded by “an increase in property taxes to a maximum of \$180” over four years.

The *Toronto Star*, which commissioned this poll, splashed the 80 per cent figure on the front page of its print editions.

What’s the public to think about polls that are conducted at the same time and show support ranging from 43 per cent to 80 per cent? It might be an unfair reaction, but it’s not likely that such wildly different results convince the public that surveys are trustworthy.

The poll that found 43 per cent in favour of the Toronto transit plan was conducted over the phone by interactive voice response (IVR), while the poll that found 80 per cent

in favour was conducted online. In the online poll, Toronto residents’ computer screens showed a colour map of the proposed subway lines along with the questions.

According to the *Star*, Jodi Shanoff, senior vice-president of Angus Reid Public Opinion, the polling firm that did the online survey, commented, “People are very excited to see the colours on the map and all those different routes.”

Excited, and perhaps persuaded by the map.

One of the most valuable tools in the marketing researcher’s kit is the ability to show online respondents alternative TV commercials for the same product or different executions of print ads. When respondents prefer advertisement A over advertisement B, research suppliers can confidently point their clients to better-informed decisions.

But can the images seen by respondents sway their feelings about issues and public policy? The marketing research industry has worked to refute suspicions of self-selection bias in online polls. Every polltaker knows the influence of changes in the wording of survey questions. But opinion researchers have not drawn attention to the influence of photos and illustrations in surveys. Pictures persuade.

Toronto transit riders have seen subway maps for fifty years. As the Toronto transit plan polls reveal, showing respondents a familiar-looking schematic map with new subway lines snaking all over the city may have increased support for the proposed transit megaproject by 37 percentage points. People responding to the IVR survey, of course, saw no map.

Marketing researchers are always asking which photo or logo target audiences like better. No one should be surprised to see that graphics have the power to persuade. As the two Toronto transit polls show, even a map can move opinion. An art critic calls the iconic London Underground map – with its beloved routes in pleasing curves, curls and bold, eye-catching colours – “the work of a graphic genius.”

Pictures have been the agitator’s tool since the invention of the printing press. *The Economist* observed last year that when Martin Luther turned to pamphlets, his *Ninety-five Theses* went viral. “Without images,” Luther said, “we can neither think nor understand anything.”

The nineteenth century British novelist and politician Edward Bulwer-Lytton wrote, “The pen is mightier than the sword.” But it’s not always mightier than the photo, as the world has learned since the arrival of television.

Why are illustrations so persuasive?

People think in pictures. We solve problems visually, not verbally. Think of the route you’ll take to your office or the route back home. What do you see? Not sentences, fonts and text. Our brains make pictures. Neuroscience has also found that we process pictures faster than words.

The *New York Times* noted that a poster “was widely cited as having galvanized votes” in the 2010 Swiss referendum on the banning of building minarets. The poster artist depicted minarets as missiles rising from the Swiss flag, with “Stop” written below in large, black letters.

Words we easily forget. But images are much more memorable than words (research proves this).

Certainly, words can arouse us. Advisors urge politicians to “stay on message” and repeat the same sound bites to penetrate the curtain around the voters’ attention. Images, however, go straight to the brain, making emotional connections.

Images and logos have become emblems for millions of people. Think of the undetailed image of Che Guevara on posters and T-shirts. For people who came of age in the 1960s, the cover of the Beatles’ *Abbey Road* album is unforgettable.

There are sacred images, such as the crucifix, and wordless profane ones, such as the upraised middle finger.



The red cross – the logo and the agency – is recognized nearly everywhere. Canada has its red maple leaf, America its stars and stripes, and Nike its swoosh.

To the media, almost anything called a poll is accepted as newsworthy and factual. Reporters, anchors and columnists rarely explain that polls are estimates or that the wording and order of questions can alter a poll’s results. In split samples, researchers have shown that the gender of the interviewer can change the results in phone surveys. In face-to-face interviews, the interviewer’s race can affect respondents’ answers.

Marketing research and polling companies sometimes add disclaimers such as the following to their reports to clients: “All surveys are subject to several sources of error. Statements such as ‘the margin of error in this survey is ± 3.1 per cent’ can be misleading, because they imply that one can calculate the maximum possible error from all sources of error. The margin of error refers only to sampling error. Even in true random samples, factors such as the wording of questions can compromise precision. The order in which surveys pose questions may lead to different results. Other sources of error include deliberately or unintentionally inaccurate responses, nonresponse, and interviewer effects when live interviewers are used.”

So the online age of research requires an amendment to the marketing researcher’s traditional cautions about survey findings. Survey researchers should add that the images respondents see can also affect survey outcomes.

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