Misestimation and misrepresentation: polling for the truth (guest blog)

Pollster Ben Page thinks there's a big lie out there:

"nobody believes anybody anymore, the media are evil, and market researchers are evil and can't predict anything."

In his LSE lecture as part of the Polis Media Agenda Talk series the CEO of Ipsos MORI tried to correct that false picture and explain the changing polling industry. This report by Polis intern Lucia Cohen.

Although the 1200 people who work at Ipsos MORI in London conduct research for a wide variety of industries, they are best known for their political polling research. In this their essential task is to predict who will win the next general election, as well as asking people what they think about the government. These activities represent only a tiny fraction of their work but according to Page, it is of most significance because it gets 90% of all media coverage of their work. Ipsos MORI publish many of their findings on their website, based on what Page , who was named one of the "100 most influential people in the public sector" by the Guardian, described as a "vaguely altruistic idea of trying to show people what other people are thinking".

Page set out the consistent growth of the industry from its inception in the 1930's until the 2009 crash. Page started working in the polling sector in 1987, when there were only two computers in the compan.. In the 1980's, he would spend all afternoon calculating "the line of best fit" on a chart; in the early 1990's, the process took just one second to compute. Now, when the company needs to know what people are thinking, they don't even have to ask questions; they can see what people are saying on the web and use neuroscience to help identify perceptions. Similarly, this also showcases what kind of misperceptions are apparent.

As Page noted, "the media can't tell us that black is white". He argues, however, that what it can do is "find an itchy spot on our body to scratch, making us irritable". Page noted the notion of crime reporting as an example. Although crime is at one of the lowest levels since they began statistical analysis, news consumers specifically are more concerned about crime rates now than ever before because of its exposure in news media. Among others, the Internet is a significant driver of misperception because it tends to sharpen and polarize debate.

The notion of 'misestimationbias' highlights the extent to which public perception can be skewed as a result of news coverage and exposure. For example, Page said that the general public in Britain believes that teenage pregnancy is around 40%, while the real figure is less than 1%.

Page's talk showed how 'facts' are being contested now more than ever before, and so it's important to consider what was asked, and how, before taking anything as the undisputed 'truth'. The polling industry is important for discovering public perception, and when conducted and interpreted correctly, can provide fascinating insight.

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You are welcome to attend future lectures in the Polis Media Agenda Talk series. Click here for details of speakers every Tuesday at 5pm in the New Theatre, Houghton Street, LSE