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“The Professional Standards of Exit Polling”

Dr Robert Ting-Yiu CHUNG

(Transcription of the speech delivered by Dr Robert Chung, Director of Public Opinion Programme, the University of Hong Kong, at the luncheon organized by Hong Kong Democratic Foundation and co-hosted by The Professional Commons on 12 June 2008 in the Hong Kong Club.)

Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen:

- ♦ Thank you very much for inviting me, in fact, allowing me, to talk on this very timely topic, which is also very dear to my heart. When I was asked to speak to the audience today, I was given a number of topics on the role of opinion polling and democracy. I subsequently counter-proposed today's topic, namely, “the professional standards of exit polling” because I think the laying down of professional standards in the area of polling in general, and exit polling in particular, is an important cornerstone of professional development in the area of democracy.
- ♦ Moreover, this issue is particularly important to Hong Kong, because our public media is almost entirely market driven, our civil service is getting more and more political or politicized, and our academia is more and more commercialized.
- ♦ Let me be quick to add that in a free society like Hong Kong, there is nothing wrong with commercialization, market-driving and politicization. What is worrying me is the lack of parallel development in the area of professionalization and the preservation of integrity. I, in particular, refer to our media, academia and the polity at large.
- ♦ The story of exit polling is one such example.
- ♦ When direct elections at the Legislative Council level first took place in 1991, almost 17 years ago, we at the Public Opinion Programme at the University of Hong Kong was the first organization to conduct exit polls. However, I should add that one television station also conducted its own exit poll with the help of another academic in recruiting interviewers, but

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that only happened once, because in all subsequent elections, the media joined together to subscribe to our independent service.

- ◆ In 1991, immediately after we announced the introduction of exit poll in Hong Kong, the government became worried that some sort of chaos would arise, especially if exit poll results would be broadcast throughout the election day. There was, however, no legal ground to ban exit poll, so a number of meetings were held among senior government officials, media company representatives and myself as an exit poll researcher before the election. In the name of press freedom, media professionals refused to pledge non-disclosure, so government officials publicly urged voters not to respond to exit poll interviews. Although consensus was not reached, the media exercised self-constraint and did not announce exit poll predictions before the close of poll.
- ◆ In 1993, the government set up a three-member Boundary and Election Commission (BEC) to take charge of electoral matters. The Commission soon issued guidelines on elections, and one of its chapters dealt with exit poll matters. Basically, it appealed to the media and researchers not to announce exit poll results before the close of poll, and if any organization failed to comply, the Commission would “make a denunciation or censure in a public statement.” This means social pressure rather than legal sanction was the main tool. 1995, BEC further required all exit poll researchers to register with the administration seven days before any election, otherwise their interviewers would not be allowed to conduct exit poll within the “no canvassing area” which usually covers many street blocks around the polling station.
- ◆ After the 1997 handover, BEC was renamed EAC - Electoral Affairs Commission. Before the 2004 Legco election, it revised its Guidelines to require exit poll researchers to apply to the authority before running exit polls, instead of just notifying them, that means the Commission now has the right to reject applications. The 2004 revision also provides for the public announcement of all organizations and interviewers allowed to conduct exit polls “prior to the polling day for the reference of the public and candidates and such a list will also be displayed at the respective polling stations”. It turns out that such information was also published online.
- ◆ Another four years passed by, and I believe most of you are aware of the latest round of exit poll discussions in Hong Kong. The Electoral Affairs Commission released another set of proposed guidelines on 25 March 2008, and public consultation has ended on 23 April. It will

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soon issue its final guidelines on exit polls.

- ♦ An important part of the ongoing discussion is whether the government should step up its control on exit polls and my personal answer, in the name of academic freedom, is a definite “no”. However, I need to explain the story a bit and my position a lot more.
- ♦ Since the introduction of exit polls in Hong Kong almost 17 years ago, a consensus has gradually been formed, whereby the government would not legislate against the release of the exit poll results, while the media would not publish the predictions before the close of poll. This kind of consensus was based very much on self-constraint, mutual respect, and a common understanding of what is public justice. Although the government now has right to reject exit poll applications, it has not generated any opposition because, to me, there is not yet a case to be challenged, thanks to the prudence of many journalists and exit poll researchers.
- ♦ However, the emergence of partisan exit polls in recent years conducted on enormous scales has seriously challenged the consensus reached between the administration and professional practitioners. It is now an open secret that candidates and political parties in Hong Kong use exit polls for their election engineering. In 2004, based on the information released by EAC at its website, in the Legislative Council elections held on 12 September 2004, a consortium of exit pollsters belonging to one political camp has deployed nearly 2,000 people to conduct exit polls at more than 300 polling stations. The human resource involved was about 20 times that of a media-sponsored non-partisan exit poll operation conducted by us at HKU. Such partisan operations have grown even bigger in 2007. For the District Council elections held on 18 November 2007, the same consortium deployed about 2,200 people to conduct a partisan exit poll covering over 370 polling stations.
- ♦ In 2004, I wrote in an article, “I never object any political parties or other agencies conducting exit polls... What I oppose, is the research agencies’ use of dishonest means to gauge voters’ opinions for their election engineering... [Despite the] consensus reached between EAC and the media after so many years... if individual candidates are able to obtain... exit poll results to support their own appeals and vote allocation strategies, the guidelines set by EAC to prohibit the release of exit poll results will become meaningless.” It took the media and the administration more than three years to really appreciate the importance of the problem.

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- ♦ At this juncture, I think it is of utmost importance that we look at the international standards of exit polling, and see how it can be applied to Hong Kong. In the name of academic and press freedom, I object to any kind of government control on opinion polling including exit polling in Hong Kong, but I personally feel the need to introduce international standards to govern these activities.

[Robert Chung then discussed the main points of “WAPOR Guidelines for Exit Polls and Election Forecasts”, see Annex]

- ♦ Ladies and Gentlemen: I hope you can now see that there are already very sophisticated and high caliber professional guidelines existing around the world. If Hong Kong is to be a truly international city, or to become THE international city of China or Asia, why should we not settle the issue of exit polling in Hong Kong by looking beyond our horizon, to find out what is best for Hong Kong and China in the decades to come?
- ♦ We Hong Kong people have boasted ourselves to be freest city in the world, with a strong liberal tradition and government by the rule of law. Some of us might have taken pride in having a independent ICAC, and possibly also an independent Electoral Affairs Commission which is an “independent, apolitical and impartial body” established under the law. Why have we professionals not pressed our independent Commission to look at, and promote, international standards, but rather, to argue all days with our “principal officials under the accountability system”, meaning that they are by nature political appointments?
- ♦ I do not have an answer today, and we may not have answer even after this year’s election. But internationalization and professionalization is definitely the way we should be move forward, and it is the only way that we in Hong Kong can retain our leadership position among Chinese societies.
- ♦ Thank you.

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Annex

Guidelines for Exit Polls and Election Forecasts issued by World Association for Public Opinion Research (WAPOR), 10 December 2006

WAPOR Guidelines for Exit Polls and Election Forecasts

*Note: Key passages most relevant to Hong Kong have been highlighted in **bold red** by Robert Chung, who was WAPOR's Secretary-Treasurer between 2006-07.*

Written by WAPOR Exit Poll Committee
Approved by WAPOR Council, 10/12/2006

Public opinion is a critical force in shaping and transforming society. Properly conducted and disseminated, survey research provides the public with information from the measurement of opinions and attitudes and allows its voices to be heard. This document provides guidelines for conducting exit polls and making election forecasts on election days.

EVALUATING EXIT POLLS AND ELECTION FORECASTS

Exit polls are polls of voters, interviewed after they have voted, and no later than election day. They may include the interviewing before election day of postal, absentee and other early voters. In some countries election day polls cannot be conducted at the polling place, but in most cases, interviewing takes place at the polling location.

Exit polls can serve three different functions that are not mutually exclusive: predicting election results; describing patterns of voter support for parties, candidates, and issues; and supporting extensive academic research efforts. The main difference between these may be the speed with which the results are formulated and disseminated.

Exit polls used for projections should be reported as soon after the polls close as practical. Any delay in disseminating the results will inevitably raise questions about the legitimacy of the effort, especially with regard to estimating the outcome of the election. If analysis is the only purpose of the exit poll, prompt release is less important.

In some countries, election laws prohibit the publication of exit poll data until after the polls have closed. **WAPOR and ESOMAR oppose regulation of the conduct and reporting of polls in principle. However, no statement about the outcome of an election based on exit polls should be published before all the polls in the contest have closed. In national elections, this means polls relating to election results for elections in smaller voting units can be reported when all the polling places have closed in those locations, rather than waiting until all polling places used for voting that day have closed. Descriptive information other than voting behaviour may be published before the polls have closed.**

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ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

Survey researchers in general and those conducting exit polls in particular need to follow certain broad principles in conducting their research:

- 1. Exit polls conducted for public consumption should be impartial and non-partisan. Exit polls are scientific research designed to collect data and report information on electoral outcomes. They are not tools for partisan advocacy.**
- 2. Methods should be transparent, public, and well-documented.** These goals can be achieved by publicly describing the methods prior to conducting the exit poll and by **adhering to the standards of minimal disclosure** delineated in this document. It is also recommended that when the exit poll is used for analysis, the data set (without individual identifiers) along with appropriate survey documentation be deposited in public archives and/or on web sites for general access.
- 3. Data collectors must adopt study designs for their exit polls that are suitable for producing accurate and reliable results and that follow specific procedural and technical standards stipulated in this document.**
- 4. When reporting results from exit polls, data collectors and analysts must be careful to keep their interpretations and statements fully consistent with the data. Speculation and commentary should not be labeled as data-based reporting. Limitations and weaknesses in the design of an exit poll, its execution, and the results must be noted in all reports and analysis. Results should be released to the public and other interested parties through the general media and simultaneously made accessible to all.**
- 5. The identity of respondents in exit polls must be protected. No identifying information (e.g. name, address, or other IDs) should be maintained with the voter-level records, and the data set should not allow deductive disclosure of respondents' identity. To limit the chances of deductive disclosure, small-area geographic details such as the specific polling place in which votes were cast should not be revealed.**

EXIT POLL METHODS AND THEIR DISCLOSURE

Poll methods must be generally accepted as good survey practice and must be disclosed in advance of the conduct of the exit poll, as well as with any projection or analysis or subsequent public release of the dataset.

Items for Minimal Disclosure: These items should be disclosed with any exit poll report or when any projection is made. Good practice would be to disclose as much of the methodology in advance as possible, particularly those items marked with an asterisk, which should be disclosed before Election Day.

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***Sponsor of the exit poll**

*Name of the polling company or principal researcher; prior experience (if any) in exit polling; and **whether the data collector has any business or personal ties to political parties, candidates, political organizations or governmental bodies.**

*Name of the organization responsible for analysis and projections, if different.

Number of interviews

*Number of sampling points

*Sampling frame

*Geographic dispersion and coverage

*How sampling points are selected

*Where interviews are conducted: at polling places, in person at homes, by phone, etc.

*Any legal limits on data collection that might affect polling accuracy (e.g., minimum distance of interviewers from the polling place)

Time of day of interviewing

Whether interviewers are part of a permanent field staff or hired for the occasion

*How respondent anonymity is guaranteed (paper questionnaires, etc.)

The interview schedule or questionnaire and instructions

Which results are based on parts of the sample, rather than the whole sample

A description of the precision of the findings, including estimates of sampling error

Monitoring and validation procedures (if any)

Weighting procedures

Response rates (using one of the definitions in the AAPOR/WAPOR “**Standard Definitions: Final Dispositions of Case Codes and Outcome Rates for Surveys**”) and item non-response on vote questions

Any known nonresponse bias

General description of how estimates are made and the kinds of variables that are being used, and whether adjustments for nonresponse have been made

Known design effects

Political parties may sometimes make claims about private data. These claims also require

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documentation. Any public statement referring to exit poll results should abide by these disclosure principles and requirements.

Good Practices: Those conducting exit polls should always use generally accepted scientific methods. However, there are a number of good practices that apply specifically to exit polls.

Exit polls typically employ clustering in their sample designs. Because of the possibilities that various groups might attempt to influence voters and/or exit poll respondents, exit poll researchers are not expected to disclose the actual sample points or locations.

Exit polls should collect information across the whole of the polling day. Probability sampling (or full census) for interviews conducted at the polling place is the only acceptable selection method. Quotas are not appropriate for sampling at the polling place.

A national exit poll should represent the entire country, with 95% of the target population included in the sampling frame. If the sampling frame covers less than 95% of the target population, there should be an explanation for that decision.

Exit pollsters should keep in mind the relationship between small units for which the votes are tabulated and that can also serve as clusters for exit poll interviews. One way to evaluate an exit poll is to compare the actual election results and the estimates derived from the exit poll interviews for these same units. This comparison of small unit accuracy, typically at the precinct or polling place level is one of the best ways to understand the exit poll's success. But there are situations where this will not be possible, either because no tabulations are reported at the smallest voting unit level or because the sampling units do not coincide with voting units.

ELECTION PROJECTION METHODS AND THEIR DISCLOSURE

Election projections can be made in other ways than by interviewing voters as they exit the polling place. While most projections are based on interviews with voters after they have voted at a polling place, other forecasting models may include:

- interviews in person, by telephone, or by other means of communication with voters after or before having cast their votes
- counts of official votes in a sample of precincts, often known as quick counts
- a mix of methods

A projection is an estimate that leads to a conclusion about the outcome of an election in a jurisdiction such as a nation, a state or a district. This may occur in two different situations:

- If the winner is based on the popular vote for an office or a party, then a projection of the division of that vote is a projection of the outcome in the jurisdiction.

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- If the winner is based on the vote in multiple jurisdictions, such as election of a Parliament where votes are cast in districts or of a President where votes are accumulated based on victories won in many jurisdictions, a conclusion about which party has a plurality of seats in the new Parliament or which presidential candidate has a winning number of votes is a national projection.

The projection need not reach a conclusion about each sub-jurisdiction. It need only reach a conclusion about the jurisdiction outcome.

The objective of any projection is a conclusion about an election for some jurisdiction. A sample of that jurisdiction must be adequate to reach an unbiased conclusion with sufficient/appropriate confidence in the estimate. A national projection typically requires the coverage of the entire country, with at least 95% of the target population in the sampling frame.

There will be times that a subset of the country will be used (for example, only competitive districts). But if a sampling frame is used that includes something less than the entire voting population of a jurisdiction then the pollster should define what is and is not included in the sampling frame in a disclosure statement. The pollster also must publish a rationale to justify the pollster's ability to make an unbiased conclusion about the election outcome based upon collecting information from a subset of all jurisdictions.

WAPOR EXIT POLL COMMITTEE MEMBERS

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Director of Surveys, CBS News

Nick Moon, UK

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