Across the world, polls have long become a major staple of media reporting. Since the media commission polls themselves, they not only produce their own news but also – intentionally or not – intervene in the political process through the publication of poll results. The political actors – politicians, parties and their advisers – on the other hand, commission polls to help and bolster their decision making and to assess the approval of their policies and their personal popularity. They also use polls to conceive their communication strategies, either for election campaigns or for day-to-day politics. The findings of political polling are often kept secret because they primarily serve strategic purposes. They may nevertheless be passed on to the media in the interest of strategic targeting of the press and the citizens.

The proliferation of polls – in the media as well as in politics – and their use have been widely discussed and not been greeted unanimously. All in all, there is a certain consensus today about polls enabling the ‘self-observation of societies’ (Kaase and Pfetsch 2001, p. 126). Polls allow individuals to observe their environment, get an impression about what others think and compare their own stands on issues with the opinions of their fellow citizens. This assessment serves as a basis for individual behavior and may lead to an adjustment to the assumed majority opinion, either in order to not isolate oneself with a divergent opinion (according to the spiral of silence theory) or simply in search of the good feeling of being on the side of the winners (bandwagon effect). Under specific circumstances or in certain environments, there may be other effects, which, however, have received less confirmation than the bandwagon effect (cf. Moy and Rinke in this volume).

Polls are also supposed to give a voice to the people and strengthen their position in the political process vis-à-vis their representatives. Polls
enable political actors to learn about the expectations of citizens and thus challenge the responsiveness of decision makers. It is this role as an intermediary between citizens and the political system that particularly underlines the democratic function of polling, but it is also where polls compete with the media. By establishing close links to pollsters and by setting up their own polls, the media also try to defend their role in order not to relinquish the field to the polling industry.

However, doubts have been raised as to the extent to which polls are indeed an adequate instrument to mirror public opinion. George Gallup, the founder of modern survey research, has often been cited with his conviction that ‘polls are a tool for deciphering public sentiment and enabling policy makers to respond to what their constituents want’ (Jacobs and Shapiro 1995, p. 519). First of all, this statement reflects Gallup’s trust in the methodology and its careful employment. Second, Gallup saw survey research as an instrument that politicians could use to assess the attitudes of the people they represent and consider them in their decisions. Both arguments refer to the role of polls as mirrors of public opinion, implying that they deliver a true picture of reality. From an early stage of the newly developing business, Gallup’s view has been contested, both theoretically and in practice. Among the first to take a critical stand on polls were the journalist Walter Lippmann (1922, 1925) and the sociologist Herbert Blumer (1948), both contemporaries of Gallup (cf. also Splichal in this volume).

In addition to the reflective function, polls have taken on an active role as molders of public opinion: ‘They not only sample public opinion, they define it’ (Frankovic 1998, p. 150). The collection of data through surveys and their analysis is a process, which is characterized by selectivity on each step. What is asked and the way it is asked influences the way respondents think about an issue and how they react to the questions. Therefore, polls construct their own reality and this, once it is in the media, again influences the public: ‘When polls are publicized, the same opinion-shaping forces that affect the answers given by poll respondents ripple out to the public, possibly with enhanced force when certain views seem to be widely shared and therefore legitimized’ (Graber 1998, p. 217). Thus, the reality constructed by the polls and further shaped by the reporting of the polls provides a reference for those who commission polls and those who see their results.

Because people learn about poll findings mostly through the media, the quality of poll reporting has been a permanent issue for research and professional standards. Therefore, many studies have been devoted to the analysis of poll reporting. Studies from different countries again and