

AUDIENCE OPINION POLL AND THE TARGET AUDIENCE IN THE AUDIOVISUAL

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Abstract

The sociologists who write and interpret opinion polls choose their target audience according to the topic under analysis at the request of the client. However, more than once, this audience is subject to direct or subliminal information campaigns through mass media, with the purpose of forming a seemingly personal opinion on the topic. No matter how much journalists claim that it is a mere coincidence to disseminate this information just before the opinion poll, there are reasonable suspicions that contradict the good intentions of the media channel. The consequence is to be noticed in the result of the opinion poll, which practically validates what the customer who requested the survey actually wanted. Respondents are convinced that the answers given in the survey are their own points of view on the topic. In reality, these opinions have been heavily influenced by previous information in the media. In conclusion, these surveys are just some responses in the mirror of the target audience.

Keywords: *poll, target audience, media, manipulation.*

Influencing public opinion, through mass media, to win something. This is the desideratum of politics that, under the auspices of democracy, manipulates as much as it pleases. Here, however, we need to make some clarifications to understand how democracy instruments can be used against the masses, in a free society, with their consent and encouragement.

First, the concept of public opinion is a controversial one that involves several approaches. On the one hand, the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu says that the public opinion does not exist. The democratic formation of a public opinion is to be found at the center of the public space, but the massive practice of polls and the media have determined the crisis of the system of representativeness. At this point, the opinion poll has, in Bourdieu's view, the role of imposing the illusion that there is a public opinion resulting from summing up some individual opinions. On the other hand, French sociologist Dominique Wolton argues that the

public opinion is the relatively faithful reflection of the various currents of opinion that cross the present society and the most democratic means of regulating the choice the citizen makes (WOLTON, 1997).

A brief history of the notion of public opinion shows that it has three states. The first state unrolls from the French Revolution to the second half of the nineteenth century and designates an opinion of the social elites in a new field, that of open political struggle and electoral competition. The public opinion was, at that time, the opinion of MPs, elected by the people, and was characterized by the fact that it was not the opinion of ordinary citizens.

Such a vision will be gradually changed. Firstly, there appears the universal male vote by which the people get involved directly in the political game and not just the elites, which happens in the second half of the 19th century. At the same time, there is a push from the popular media, which will be the foundation for the emergence of a powerful character that will play an important role in defining the second state of public opinion. "This new political character is the journalist who, through his articles and editorials, contributes to imposing themes of discussion and creating" public opinion "by simply trying to define what this should be," states Patrick Champagne, a member of the European Center of Sociological Studies in Paris (CHAMPAGNE, 2002).

The development of the radio in the first half of the 20th century will go in the same direction, further strengthening the power of building up the popular media-media opinion.

From the second half of the twentieth century we talk about the third state of public opinion, the complex and uncertain product, of the

struggle between three distinguished actors: the politician, the journalist and the voter.

With the development of a true survey industry, the notion of public opinion will experience a new transformation. The sounding institutes, which claim only to measure the public opinion, actually impose their conception on public opinion, a conception demanded by the political field.

Media communication belongs to a global situation in which we have a technological support (scripto-visual for press, audio for radio and audio-visual for television) placed on a secondary broadcasting channel between two instances of broadcasting and receiving. There is a meeting point for the broadcasting-production and reception-interpretation processes on which the social significance is built.

Patrick Charaudeau, Professor of the Science of Language at the XIII University of Paris, draws the attention in the volume *Les medias et l'information: l'impossible transparence du discours* on the media means of communication and claims that they are not an instance power. Even though we can not deny that the media is not alien to the various games of social power, it can not be the supreme power because the power never depends on one individual, but in the context, the instance in which the individual manifests himself gives him power (CHARAUDEAU, 2005).

Charaudeau states that in the case of media communication, the goal should be to inform. In this context, the media contract connects a production instance consisting of media professionals, generically called journalists, and a receiving instance that is made up of receivers represented by readers, listeners, viewers.

So we have a journalistic instance and a receiving instance. In the case of the journalistic instance, whose social role is the transmission of information, it must be said that it is not itself the creator of events but it only collects them. There is also a peculiarity of journalistic identity, that of forecasting information, but here the journalist is struggling with three problems. One of the issues is whether the events are likely to become information may be broadcast: the journalists are limited in their work either by the number of information they can provide or the technological

constraints of space or time. Another difficulty is that the journalist can not be present in all places in the world where something happens, so he uses different sources that, in principle, must be confronted and checked. The third difficulty is related to the economic and social competitive situation in which the press body finds itself and which forces him to delimitate himself from one situation in relation to others.

These three types of difficulties make the journalist make a mass selection of facts, the selection of which is the main criterion for the time: always the first piece of information will be topical. This role of selector determines a series of incidents under the communication aspect of the information contract.

On the other hand, as I said, we have a receiving instance that has the social role of reader, listener or viewer to get informed. Sociological surveys attempt to define the profile of readers, listeners or viewers, some targets are set according to the political, professional, social, age, opinions but they prove heterogeneous and unstable.

In conclusion, one can say that the journalist transmits the information to an indefinite audience, to which he underestimates the degree of interest, ignorance, desire, of faith. In this situation, and taking into account the economic competition in the media, the journalist has as a media purpose the tendency to address a larger audience, to interest them and to captivate them. Consequently, to define the media communication, Patrick Chareaudau starts from two contracts (CHARAUDEAU, 1992):

- an information contract that refers to the selection of facts according to the competitive position and the attempt to answer the question: "What is happening here and elsewhere?";
- a capture contract that refers to the manner in which the transmission is to be made, depending on the characteristics of the receivers.

The capture contract is based on two principles:

- a principle of seriousness - for this information contract to be recognized by the receiving instance, the information must be reliable. This principle of seriousness assumes that when given information it should be checked.

- a “to please” principle that seduces the audience, and for this it must excite them. Hence the practice of staging information. These two principles (seriousness - credibility / pleasure - spectacularity) and the double contract (information / capture) make this media communication of information to place itself on a device presented as a wonderful “science of rendering machine” (CHARAUDEAU, 1992), as presented in Tabel 1.

Tabel 1. The situation of media communication

Information contract				
Events_	Production instance	Treatment Mode	Receiving Instance	Action
the mass of facts	journalists	credibility	readers	use
Various sources	select	spectacular	listeners	for
competition	processing	(seriousness/ pleasure)	viewers	information
The capture contract				

The sociologist Patrick Champagne believes that the current way of producing political opinion is the result of dominance within social fields (CHAMPAGNE, 1990).

With the advent of mass media communication, of opinion and marketing polls, the communication has intervened in the transformation of practices in fields of every kind. Initiated almost half a century ago, the surveys are mainly intended for the functioning of the political field, but at the same time they are subject to constant criticism. The main accusation is the conscious manipulation of public opinion. And the discussions about the scientific validity of these polls went to the sphere of politics, and those who had reservations about the polls were accused, not just on a few occasions, of being enemies of democracy and universal suffrage.

In the current political context, polls have become a business that often turns against those who have ordered them. The most popular case is the presidential election in Romania on the 6th of December, 2009, when, at the closing of the ballot boxes, the exit-polls gave Mircea Geoana as the winner of the Social Democratic Party, with 52 percent of the voters’ options. After only a few hours, counting the votes, the situation changed dramatically in favor of candidate Traian Băsescu, who obtained the highest position in the state with 50.33% of the votes cast. Such polls, not only push politicians to desperate and embarrassing gestures, disorient the electorate, but they are also sinful because they are very expensive. It has been

reached the critical point where electoral survey firms are no longer chosen on a professional but clientele basis.

And yet, by returning to the pioneering period of the public poll, the actors of the political game had to admit then that it expressed what “the people thought” in a much more precise way. In fact, the practice of opinion polls is strongly linked to the political system and the notion of public opinion. Patrick Champagne argues that the specific force of survey respondents is political and not scientific as they believe. “More specifically, their strength resides in the fact that they have the appearances of science to serve political goals, essentially practical ones. They play, if we can say so, on two levels: they carry out their investigations in the so-called name of democracy as they claim to give the word to all people, but they achieve them on an ethnic basis in such a way that they can prefigure the results of some future election scrutiny” (CHAMPAGNE, 1990).

In conclusion, those polling specialists, and then as well as now, are rather serving the political system than analyzing it, as they claim. Hence the major manipulation of opinion poll practice that is more unconscious than conscious. Patrick Champagne’s studies show that the practice of surveys first manipulates them, without realizing, those who use them, politicians and journalists who think that it is interesting to do polls to find out what the public opinion is thinking, without wondering what public opinion is.

Apparently, the manipulation begins from the time of writing the questions and continues in the manner in which the given answers are interpreted. In fact, the manipulation occurs just before the questionnaire is written, simply by the fact that some groups of people whose opinions are allegedly being tested are made.

Asking a group to know what they are doing or what they are thinking is to give a social existence to that group, that is to transform the group into a person endowed with his own personality and will. Nothing is given, everything is built, said the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard (BACHELARD, 2001). And then we wonder what we should call public opinion: the mobs that actually mobilize for a cause or the silent majority, that is what people who say nothing think and who do not want to take public attitude? And why should we take into account what the public opinion wants, to the extent that it is supposed to express the popular will. We could as well admit that the public opinion is wrong and, before being consulted, needs to be informed and even educated.

The journalistic field has become the major strategic place where this new type of symbolic struggle takes place, the results of which are recorded by survey operators. It is the place where the public opinion is formed, as it is caught by the opinion polls. According to Patrick Champagne, communications advisors and public relations specialists, whose number, surprisingly exceeds twice that of journalists, prepare the "news effects" and the "media blows" of the political people, and are meant to shock the press, to suggest an opinion or another, and then the survey operators to collect them.

Thus, what the polls record is not the opinion of the population about a certain subject of major interest, but the opinion of the political class, as well as its staging through the press, aimed at the people, in order to say as in a mirror, what the political class wanted to make them say to gain extra legitimacy.

In other words, the so-called opinion surveys consist in measuring the visibility of media actions and in assessing the degree of approval or disapproval of the proposed messages in order to adjust - according to a logic of their own

rather than to democracy - a political message may have nothing to do with reality.

And Giovanni Sartori, Professor of Philosophy and Political Sciences at the Universities of Florence and Colombia, New York, wonders, in the volume "*Homo videns, Imbecility Through Television and Post-Thinking*," published in Humanitas Publishing House in 2006, how, in fact, the public opinion is shaped? If, on the one hand, we accept that public opinion is the set of opinions within a public, which is the public and embraces the general interest, then we should also accredit the idea that an opinion is not knowledge and science but merely a point of view, an expression of the subjective opinion for which there is no evidence is required, as claimed by the German philosopher and sociologist Jurgen Habermas in *Storia e critica dell'opinione pubblica*, published in the Laterza publishing house in Bari in 1971. In other words, opinions are feeble and changeable beliefs. And democracy is a rule of opinion.

But here there is the question of how to form an autonomous public opinion that really belongs to the the public. This formative opinion should be open to exogenous information flows that it receives from the political power or from the mass media tools. But here there is the risk that this opinion of people may "hetero-directed" (SARTORI, 2006). Giovanni Sartori believes that "as long as public opinion was predominantly modeled by newspapers, the balance between autonomous opinion and heteronomous (hetero-directed) views was guaranteed by the existence of a free and multiple press on several voices. The spread of the radio did not substantially alter this balance. The problem arises with television and to the what extent the visual replaces the word" (SARTORI, 2006).

As long as the linguistic communication prevails, the public opinion processes do not happen directly from top to bottom but occur "in cascades", more precisely in a succession of cascades interrupted by pools where the views are mixed up, Sartori explains. Thus, the opinions of each of us refer to some reference groups and are not only formed by informational messages but also by identifiers.

The emergence of the television image breaks this equilibrium established in time. The

television practically takes the place of the so-called intermediary opinion leaders, says Sartori, and removes the crowd of “cognitive authorities” who establish differently, for each of us, who to believe, who is trustworthy and who is not.

With the television, the authority of the image also appears. According to Giovanni Sartori, the eye believes in what it sees, and the most credible cognitive authority becomes the seen thing. Because what is seen seems real and, implicitly, it seems true. And the videocracy is constantly producing a heavily heterogeneous opinion that apparently strengthens, but in reality it empties democracy as a ruling of opinion. Television shows itself as a spokesman for a public opinion that is essentially the echo of its own voice.

Continuing the same idea, Pierre Bourdieu shows that the sounding institutes do not really measure the public opinion but produce false images that they subsequently deliver as an illegal scientific exercise. Bourdieu also reminds that, paradoxically, the sounding institutes forget to take into account a much more “public opinion” than the one created on paper by computer programs. This shows the “science” with which interest groups, especially political ones, act through “pressure groups” or “lobbies” within press trusts (BOURDIEU, 2007).

Bourdieu brings into discussion a true sociological theory of making public opinion later disseminated in the press. In a series of articles published in the 1980s (*Liberation Magazine*, 1982), the French sociologist points out that, starting from the secondary analysis of surveys conducted by public research institutes, they show that the likelihood of having a so-called “personal” opinion varies according to the social groups surveyed. The cultural capital of an individual is measured by the level of school education and, in particular, by the ability to respond to a political question.

In fact, the involvement of the person who agrees to fill in the questionnaire is related to the recognition of his / her right to have an opinion on a particular subject that is found in the question, or the respondent must necessarily have an opinion. However, this interest should be supported by a series of information, at least minimal, on the topic the respondent should

have. But most of the time, he will not recognize his lack of knowledge in the field.

In order to demonstrate the lack of readiness of those who are willing to fill in public questionnaires, Pierre Bourdieu analyzes a political television show, *Face à Face*, a show created by the producers Jean Faran and Igor Barrèr and broadcast from February 24 to October 3 1966 on the French public television channel. Subsequently, *Face à Face* was replaced by the *En Direc avec* program.

In this program an interview was given to a political personality by a sample, made up, by a survey institute, of twenty people who were supposed to be representative of the French population. Bourdieu notices the behavioral changes of these people, the same for half a year, as they felt “invested with a mission,” with the tendency to be treated as celebrities once the notoriety was gained.

If at first they seemed timid and relatively incompetent, they gained courage and self-confidence. They started to prepare their questions before the show, to get informed about the personality to be interviewed. In conclusion, these people sought to discover their competencies according to the role assigned to them or attributed it themselves.

This once again demonstrates that the attempt to produce an opinion is unequally distributed and varies, in particular, according to the cultural capital available to each individual. For this reason, when individuals have to respond to a survey on the field, they express themselves in very different ways, which the surveyors do not take into account, sometimes knowingly.

Survey makers use the homogenizing technique of pre-coded questions and then collect the answers. Only these identical answers are actually different because they are the result of different logic.

The sociological analysis of the practice of opinion polls, televised political debates or street demonstrations in the press shows that it is not really a progress in the true sense of the word, but rather a kind of sophistication, the use of misconceptions that distort the truth, seeking the credibility, using social technologies and trying to give the impression that this is the word of the people.

With this so-called progress, the political field tends to close itself, the political game being increasingly left to the hands of specialists who, using polls, claim to give the general public a speech. In fact, they use these surveys like a ventriloquist who borrows the voice of his puppet. Nowadays, according to Patrick Champagne, the democratic ideal is less threatened by totalitarianism than this type of scholarly demagoguery, just as dangerous as it creates the appearance of a democracy.

The Spanish writer and journalist Ignacio Ramonet warns in the volume *Propagandes silencieuses*, appeared at the Galilée publishing house in Paris in 2000, on the modern communication mechanism that uses subtle global manipulation. And this in the conditions in which the illusion still exists that the media system has the fundamental role of presenting the reality. Ramonet argues that in this sense the press consumer is waiting for the journalist to return a copy of the model that life provides. However, today's media reality confronts us with the function of constitution, that is, of the construction of reality, which the information manifests (TRAN & STĂNCIUȚELU, 2007). This is no longer a neutral mirror of a fact, of an event, but a staging of many factors. The basic concepts of journalism have changed. Now, the information means not only the provision, precise description and verification of a fact, but also a set of contextual partners that allow the reader or viewer to understand their profound meaning. Under the influence of modern television, its informational ideology, live and real-time broadcasting, informing now means showing the ongoing history (IGNACIO, 2000). This created the illusion that seeing is to understand. From here, the fascination for the live images, the request thus justifying the offer of false documents, reconstructions, manipulations and mistifications.

Because of the impact the image has on television, it is the one that demands the choice of the event, thus constraining the written and audio media to follow it. The idea arises that the importance of events is proportional to their wealth of images. Consequently, an event that can be shown live is more remarkable than the one that remains invisible and of abstract importance.

At the same time, the emergence of the Internet reduces the time it takes for the information to be transmitted. The written press seems to be outdated, having to present a particular event with a long delay from the moment of its production. For this reason, printed newspapers are bound to confine themselves to reporting local events, business and business issues.

On the other hand, a fact becomes true or not, not because it conforms to objective, rigorous and confirmed criteria from at least three sources, but only for the simple reason that all information media repeats the same information. Thus, the repetition replaces the demonstration, and the information is replaced by the confirmation.

In drafting a news story or in making a show, the reporter must be objective, not be influenced by his / her own feelings, be fair to all actors involved in the event, provide the right to reply in case of allegations, not to prejudice the image of those without targeted without sound reasons, not to use juveniles and not to disclose their identity, not to use information using threats, to call on the authorities in the field to verify information, to use in the drafting a simple, direct language, meaningful for the audience to whom it is addressed. These rules are related to the deontology of the journalist profession. However, these rules can be easily violated if there is no common sense and if the broadcasting laws are not respected.

The lack of professionalism of the journalist or his subjective involvement in the writing of an audio-video program, be it news stories, talk shows or entertainment shows, always leads to the distortion of the truth. When this happens knowingly and badly, we are dealing with intentional manipulation. The technique of manipulation has evolved greatly in recent years, with increasing interest in getting the largest and most rapid profit by using undue means.

Knowing the handling methods, the categories of audience that can be manipulated and, last but not least, of those through whom the manipulation is achieved should be priorities of the management of those who run TV stations. By identifying the methods of manipulation and by knowing the mechanisms through which it can be carried out, the intentions of fraud can be prevented. This should be a desideratum of television, whether

public or commercial, which by its nature is bound to be objective, equidistant, balanced. These goals are sometimes difficult to achieve in the case of private televisions that are self-financing and could therefore be prone to compromise. From this point of view, the public television retains a neutral status, the main sources of funding being TV fee, state budget allocations, and only on third place is the advertising revenue. But in the case of the public television, subordinated to Parliament, the political factor intervenes because TVR operates under the control of Parliament, in accordance with Law no. 41/1994. The Chairman of the Board of Directors is appointed by Parliament for a period of 4 years. The Board of Directors of TVR comprises 13 people, appointed by the majority vote of deputies and senators. At the end of each year, the Parliament analyzes TVR's activity report. If it is rejected, the Board of Directors automatically falls. The person in charge of the public television has a double quality, the TVR's general manager and TVR's chairman of the Board of Directors. The investment in office is made through the opinion of the Parliament's Committee on Culture. All these aspects create the premises of editorial pressures on the program makers, but also on the management.

In order to fulfill its role as public television, that is to inform accurately, fairly and impartially, the Romanian Television Company introduced the Status of the journalist of the TVR. To this it is added the provisions of the Law no. 41/1994, republished, with the subsequent amendments and completions, and those of the audiovisual law 504/2002.

Despite these measures, there are still many skirmishes from professional ethics. There are few situations when those who introduce manipulation elements in television programs are not aware of the negative effects of such processes. Sometimes those who make the programs are manipulated and who, by ignorance, manipulate the viewer by the way they transmit the information.

Knowing the negative effects of manipulation, each journalist has the choice - he continues to manipulate even though it causes harm to one

(and does so in the sense of a financial gain or popularity that by honest means he could not obtain) or assume the mistakes committed, including the sanctions that are imposed and go further on the path of professionalism.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle said that "the ethical virtue is a middle line between two vices, one caused by excess, the other by insufficiency ... it tends straight to the right measure. That is why it is difficult to achieve perfection; for in any thing it is difficult to reach the point of equilibrium, just as the center of a circle can not be determined by anyone but by a connoisseur."

Studies show that the mass media has penetrated so much in the lives of each of us that we can associate this concept with a drug that the mind and the body of the press consumer demands every day. It is an addiction that we often feel painful but no one yet wants to diagnose and look for an effective remedy. If there is a remedy, it should be radical and would imply, first of all, the recognition that we are partakers of a cultural failure initiated and encouraged by mass media and, above all, the audio-visual and sustained, conscious or not, by those who assume the name of faithful viewer. To resist this kind of media violence, we should live far away from everything what the media means in a kind of social autism, assume responsibility for failures, and accept that we are, in fact, the victims of a form of social violence that we have supported and encouraged.

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