

The Influence of Empathy in Public Opinion Discourse

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Abstract

The simple system of spreading an opinion or appreciation must not be confused with the broad system of forming public opinion. The criterion according to which an opinion is considered public opinion is not the degree of dissemination through mass media or other means but the degree of fidelity of the transmitted opinions that express what is common to the general public. The system of forming group opinions and the polarity feature of individual opinions should not be confused with the process of creating public opinion, whose action is to involve consensus, not to exclude it. The process of forming public opinion does not eliminate the confrontation of individual opinions on different issues. Discussions and confrontations between individual opinions or between currents of opinion, including some larger or smaller communities, do not constitute public opinion; they express the common point of view reached.

Keywords: *public discourse, communication, public opinion*

INTRODUCTION

The media system includes the techniques and means that allow people to communicate with each other and transmit messages with varied contents. The work consists of the press, radio, and television. Politicians' use of the media system is seen as an improvement of the dialogue between politicians and citizens and a regression of democratic debate. „The relationship between the press and political life appears as a force field, in which the two partners try to achieve their specific goals using various procedures. The objectives and status of the partners in this confrontation are not equal: politicians use the means of communication to acquire more votes. For them, the press is just a tool”.[1]

As Coman M aptly points out, mass media plays a pivotal role in political life, giving rise to various phenomena: the personalisation of political power, the sensationalisation of political events, the shaping of political discourse, and the standardization of power presentation. These effects underscore mass media's significant influence on public opinion formation.[1]

Denis McQuail's study Communication [2], by C.J. Bertrand, An Introduction to the Written and Spoken Press [3], by Mihai Coman, Introduction to the Mass Media System and that of Ioan Drăgan Paradigms of Mass Communication [4] is the bibliography I will be using at this moment. In this communication, I will refer to mass media's powerful and limited effects, especially the spiral of silence theory and the agenda-setting model. The topics that will be analysed are who sets the agenda for the mass media and how public opinion is formed. The agenda effect of the mass

media refers to the ability of the mass media to amplify the importance of an issue in the minds of individuals by repeatedly providing information. The spiral of silence argues that mass media have potent effects on public opinion. On a controversial issue, individuals form their opinions regarding the distribution of public opinion. They try to determine if they represent the majority, and then to determine if public opinion shifts to agree with them. If they feel they are in the minority, they tend to remain silent on the issue. They tend to keep quiet if they think public opinion is shifting against them. The more they stay silent, the more other people will feel that their point of view is not represented and will remain silent. In creating this chapter, I considered several bibliographic references: Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's *The Spiral of Silence. Public opinion - our social envelope* [5], Dennis McQuail, S. Windahl with the paper Models of communication for the study of mass communication [6], Mass-media and society [7] by P. Dobrescu and Alina Bârgăoanu, M. DeFleur, Sandra Ball-Rokeach Theories of mass-communication [8].

The development of public opinion

In Moris Ginsberg's conception, the development of public opinion must fulfil three conditions: extreme similarities of interests must be spread in a group with a certain self-awareness; „they must be the result of the meeting of several minds in the community” [9].

Thirdly, the widespread opinion must be recognized in general, and each individual must identify the opinion as the common opinion. “A particularly important role in the formation and orientation of public opinion currents is played by the so-called intermediate processes (the role of micro-groups, opinion leaders, interpersonal relationships and conversations), which strongly condition (mediate) the influence exerted through mass communication.” [9] The research has shown that public opinion is formed and acts at different levels according to the size of the respective social groups or collectivities. Thus, public opinion is identified at the „level of socio-professional groups with smaller dimensions, at the level of some zonal, residential communities, at the level of some organisations or bodies, at the level of some categories, social classes, of one or some nations, at the world level. Without making an absolute separation between these levels of formation of public opinion, they need to be studied relatively separately because, from one level to another, the way of formation differs, as well as the social influence that public opinion exercises” [10].

As a collective process, public opinion has different structures: 1) a polarising structure, that is, opposing opinions within the public at an event, at a certain moment; 2) the homogeneous structure refers to unanimous opinions; 3) a structure in which a majority opinion and a minority opinion are distinguished. An essential source in the formation of public opinion at the macrosocial level is the information and interpretative assessments offered by the mass media, as they: 1) can simultaneously offer the same information to a broad audience, made up of different people, between whom there are no direct contacts; 2) they can offer these individuals a centre of common interests, even topics of debate; 3) the assessments and information provided can trigger identical reactions from different audiences. A fundamental importance in forming public opinion is the public, as exposed by Vincent Price, with its four layers: the general public, the electorate, the interested public, and the active public. Different actors contribute to the formation of public

opinion: „First, the political leaders, in direct communication with their small group of supporters; then, the party leaders and apparatuses, in communication, either mediated by the local representatives of the parties, or directly, during the electoral campaigns, on the occasion of political rallies and marches; subsequently, journalists appeared between them and the public, who, on the one hand, conveyed the messages of the political class to increasingly distant and heterogeneous masses and, on the other hand, drew the attention of the representatives of the Power to the state of mind, dissatisfaction, interests, issues or the aspirations that characterized different groups and social strata. One more actor has appeared in this communication game: survey specialists. They have the advantage of proposing research techniques with a scientific twist and providing quick, accurate data about the attitude of well-defined segments of society towards a specific topic”.^[1] The complexity of the factors that intertwine at the macrosocial and group levels, together with the coordinates of the standardized framework, compete in the formation of public opinion.

The components of the mass media system are divided into various categories, depending on the classification criteria used: 1) according to the medium on which the message is transmitted, it can be determined which are printed media (books, newspapers, magazines, posters), and electronic ones (radio, television, computer); 2) according to the content, the entertainment and advertising media can be isolated from the information media; 3) according to the technical elements, the broadcasting media (messages are transmitted via radio waves, cable) and autonomous media (signals are translated allowing the message to be understood: the radio) are identified; 4) by function, information media (data storage and processing), representation media (allow reading messages), distribution media (transmit messages) are distinguished; 5) depending on the size of the population that receives the messages, group media (closed-circuit television), individual media (photography device) and mass media are distinguished; 6) according to the method of correlation, offline media (contain messages on a medium that does not allow direct communication: book, newspaper, electromagnetic tape) and online media (transmit messages, offer various services: electronic mail, mail) are distinguished; 7) according to the method of procurement, products purchased directly (books, newspapers, magazines, cassettes and CDs) are distinguished from those for which an access fee is paid (cable TV, radio waves, the Internet) and those for which no directly pay a price (commercial radio and television).

The mass media is analysed from a sociological point of view from two perspectives: one that focuses on communication and the other on means. The first perspective distinguishes between types of communication: 1) intrapersonal (individual) communication takes place in the “inner forum of each individual” [4]; 2) interpersonal communication (between people) consists of face-to-face dialogue between two or more people; 3) mass communication (social level) “refers to communication carried out by different means, addressing a wide and usually heterogeneous audience.”

Mass communication - a new dimension of the social communication process

The expression mass media is made up of two words: mass, an English term referring to the mass of consumers of cultural forms and represents an attribute of the second, the Latin word media in

plural form, “*which refers to media on which messages are fixed on*” [4] (means of communication). The term “medium (plural media) is a word of Latin origin, transplanted into an Anglo-Saxon ensemble. It designates mediation processes and means of communication and is generally translated with the expression mass communications (...). So, media = means of communication; mass media = means of communication for a large audience, a mass audience, invented and used in modern civilizations and having as an essential characteristic their tremendous force, power, and a vast range of action. Broadcasting and television must be included in this category (...). The cinema is in the same category (...). For the same reasons, the press is considered one of the leading mass media. Books (...), discs, tapes, cassettes, or videocassettes can also be classified as mass media—also the advertising poster. As Marshall McLuhan rightly does, it can be considered that the word, telephone, the telegraph, and writing are also means of communication... Even if they serve instead to establish interpersonal relationships than as transmitters to the public”.[11]

In the phrase mass media, the notion of media is essential, representing two things: „a specific communication technology”[12] defined in relation to the communication channel and the stages of communication, for example: “the technical means necessary to produce a television show are not the same as for making a newspaper or a radio show”[12]; „a communication language”[12] that constitutes a set of technologies: the technologies for developing and producing messages (camera, tape), messages as carriers of information (images, sounds), and technologies for receiving messages by the public (the radio, the television, the cassette player, etc.)[12].

The concept of media refers to different things: „1) a technique or a set of techniques to a) produce messages and manufacture manoeuvrable media - which involves a certain transport time; b) instant transmission of messages through a specific channel (radio waves, cable) to a terminal (receiver, monitor); 2) the set of messages created with the help of this technique; 3) the set of organisations that produce or treat these messages”.[12] Regardless of the meanings of the term media, one idea remains constant: „broadcasting a product to several receivers”[1], the media being the way to ensure the circulation of messages at a fast pace over large geographical spaces to a large number of individuals. Media is not only a technical means of communication but also has a connotation of language. The term mass has the meaning of public, but also other meanings: „the size of the audience enjoyed by means of modern communication, in other words, the social amplitude (the social amplitude of the message); simultaneity of information transfer to a wide audience; mass society, as a type of society in relation to the practice of mass cultural consumption; not infrequently, the mass attribute acquires the pejorative meaning of the taste of the masses, especially in elite theories of culture”.[12]

In the mass media analysis, the following elements are taken into account: 1) the research of the content that is communicated; “in this context, the study of its way of structuring, determined by the medium, the communication tool, should not be ignored; each communication channel corresponds to its own, specific language”[8]; 2) the research of the mode by which the message is transmitted, as well as a specific cultural content because “this content is processed by its mass diffusion and is structured according to the restrictions imposed by the specific codes of each

communication language”[7]; 3) the research of the “social dimension: the contents designed for their transmission on mass communication channels are addressed to the public for certain purposes. The study of effects (what effect does the message have) correlates with the analysis of the producer (who transmits) and, likewise, with the analysis of the cultural content and its structuring modules (what and how it is transmitted)”[12]. Mass media are defined as “technical supports that serve to transmit messages to a group of separate individuals”[3]. In other words, it is about different machines used in the communication process to reproduce writing (typography) or to prolong hearing and sight (television, radio, film, etc.). Judging the mass media as a whole, they can be divided into three categories: 1) „printed media (books, newspapers, magazines, posters); 2) means based on the film (photography and cinematography); 3) electronic means (radio, television, telephone, videocassette recorder, fax, computer, etc.)”[19] Mass media refers to „social institutions dealing with the production and distribution of knowledge and which are distinguished by the following characteristics: the use of (relatively) advanced techniques for mass production and distribution of messages to (potentially) vast audiences, which they are unknown to the communicator and free to receive his messages or refuse them”[12].

Mass communication requires professional communicators, specialised in transmitting messages through different media, and a communication control system „given that this is done through institutions that operate based on certain norms” [13]. The best-known mass communication analysis scheme is the one the American researcher Harold D. Lasswell proposed. It starts from the idea that in any communication action, the five fundamental questions must be considered: who?; what does it say?; on which channel?; who? and with what effect?. The first question, who?, corresponds to „control analysis and aims at studies on the conditioning of messages”[14]

The second question concerns the content analysis of communication, based on the study of messages and their orientation; the third question concerns communication channels; the fourth question concerns the analysis of the audience and the way the message is received; and the fifth question concerns the analysis of media effects and effectiveness.

As I said, the second perspective emphasises the means, as the mass media represent the central component of mass communication processes. There is no perfect synonymy between the concepts of mass media, mass communication, means of mass communication, and communication media. The confusion between mass communication and means of communication must be avoided. In this sense, A. Guvillier defines mass communication: „The ensemble of procedures (press, radio, television, cinema, etc.) through which information, propaganda, and action on public opinion are carried out” [4]. Denis McQuail appreciates that the means of mass communication bear this name because they are „destined for mass reproduction, in part because they are suitable for communicating with a mass of individuals - an internally undifferentiated conglomerate of people, united by a common interest in a certain (type of) message and sharing several other common features for this reason and others derived from it”[3].

The notion of mass media refers to the supports and technical means of transmitting messages (communication tools), and that of mass communication refers to „the ensemble of the communication process that incorporates what is conveyed, who conveys it, and those who receive

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it the messages” [15]. Mass communication differs from other types of communication in that the participants are not individuals but collectives that address a large part of the population. In addition, it presupposes „the existence of certain technical means for transmission so that the communication can reach all the targeted individuals at the same time” [6].

For this reason, television and print media have a low capacity for feedback, relying primarily on audience research, individual responses by phone, and correspondence. “Mass communication addresses relatively large, heterogeneous and anonymous audiences: messages are transmitted publicly, often organised in time, to reach the majority of audience members simultaneously; they (messages) have an ephemeral character; the communicator tends to be a complex organisation or to function as such and may incur significant costs” [6]. Starting from the model of interpersonal communication and in mass communication, someone (emitter-creator of the message) transmits a message through a channel to be received by the beneficiary (receiver-public).

F. Balle identifies three types of media: 1) “autonomous media” [1]: where the transmission channel owns the message. They do not require technical decoding elements: the messages in books, posters, and newspapers are within direct reach of those who meet the access code, i.e., the reading rules. Electronic media require the existence of technical decoding facilities through which messages are changed into forms accessible to the human senses (television, radio, tapes, CDs);

2) “broadcast media” [1]: the channel has only the role of transmitting messages: cable, satellite;

3) “media of communication” [1]: It allows dialogue at a distance between individuals or between groups, such as by telephone, traditional, and electronic mail.

In mass communication, the two interaction processes specific to interpersonal communication are not carried out: between sender and receiver and between receivers. „Communication is unidirectional, the transmitter (mass media organisations) dominating and even monopolising the act of transmitting messages; the response of the receivers is weak, late (compared to the moment of broadcasting the materials), without the power to change the route or the content of the communication” [1]. The receivers’ reaction to the group of transmitters and the feedback is slow, even non-existent. The feedback becomes an indifferent reaction with an indirect character, which causes losses if individuals no longer purchase the respective magazine or newspaper.

Since the mass media is an open system, the messages are public because everyone can receive them, and their content concerns subjects from the public sphere. Denis McQuail appreciates that the mass media is an „important means of defining public issues, different from personal ones or those that are the focus of experts” [6].

Marshall McLuhan „initiates a new theory on mass media, starting from the idea that they are not just tools, channels for transmitting information, but mediums representing the message themselves and which, by the nature and specificity of their technology and the way of the perception it requires worsens the way the message is received and the global effects of communication” [4]. The author appreciates that „the media is the message” [16]. According to him, „every media is the extension, prolongation or exploitation of a human sense (typography

and prints provide information through visual activity), and the role of the media is not reduced to the transmission of information; through their quality as specific mediums, they modify how individuals perceive the world, shape people's sensibility and thinking, thus extending their effects to the level of global society and ultimately determining the modification and succession of different civilisations"[4].

McLuhan classifies mass media into two categories: warm media (radio, cinema) and cold media (telephone, television, hieroglyphs or ideograms). A warm medium is „that which expands a single sense, giving it a high definition. High definition characterises the state in which you are well fed with data” [16]. Cold means claiming a “high participation and a high degree of completion from the assistance” [16].

Agenda setting

The agenda-setting hypothesis proposes „the basic idea that people receive information through the mass media. People find out not only the problems but also how they are ranked from the point of view of importance” [17]. *Agenda-setting constitutes* „the faculty of mass media to mentally order and organise the world in our place” [4]. Initially, the agenda-setting model claimed that the mass media had the role of structuring the harsh and all-encompassing reality that could not be avoided. The mass media „delimits the political debates and determines which themes will make voters go to the polls. *Agenda-setting theory* rejects the principles of limited influence and incorporates elements of persuasive communication, establishing a strict causality between phenomena and results” [18]. The individual who receives the political messages is considered to be „subject to informational pressure without having decision-making power; it is only the endpoint of the communication process” [18]. In 1963, Bernard Cohen stated the simple version of the agenda-setting model, stating that: „the press may not succeed most of the time in telling people what to think, but it is surprisingly successful in telling its readers what to think about” [7]. Cohen argued that „in political debates, the press manages to attract and distract attention to certain things by establishing priorities” [18].

In the study of M. McCombs and D. Shaw, the idea is developed that the mass media build the agenda of public opinion, establishing priorities and hierarchies of social-political events. R. Cobb and C. Elder considered the role of the mass media in building the political agenda. Thus „it is about the correlation between the media coverage of the news (the agenda set by the mass media), the public perception of the news (the public opinion agenda), and the agenda of the political debate (the themes and priorities addressed by politicians, especially during the electoral campaigns)”. According to M. McCombs and D. Shaw “audience members learn about public issues from the mass media; at the same time, it finds out how much importance to give to a theme or issue, depending on the significance that the media gives to that theme or issue. For example, when reporting what candidates say during the campaign, the media seem to decide the critical issues. In other words, the media set the campaign agenda. This ability to produce effects at a cognitive level represents one of the most essential aspects of the power of mass media [6].

In 1968, M. McCombs and D. Shaw conducted a study on 100 people from Chapel Hill, North Carolina, during the presidential election campaign and reached two significant conclusions: 1) „a high correlation between the importance given by the media to certain themes (events, problems) and the perception of their importance by the subjects; 2) the undecided are more inclined than the other subjects to follow the electoral campaign, being more attracted by the terrain chosen by the media and politicians. Exposure to the electoral campaign (to the media and to the propaganda of the politicians who set the stakes for the various options) acts, mainly under the impact of the media and political agenda, on the behaviour of the undecided, those who tilt the balance of the vote” [4].

The public considers events important when the latter are broadcast intensively by the media and all media channels. Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton called this phenomenon „the status-conferring function of mass media” [1]. According to them, „audiences subscribe to the circular belief that if you are critical, then you attract the attention of the media, and if you are in the media’s sights, then you are certainly important” [1].

The press gives legitimacy and prestige to some individuals, events, and institutions, promoting them as subjects of maximum interest in the collective debate. M. McCombs and D. Shaw show that „the media play a special role in the social construction of reality; the means of social communication have an essential role in generating a common culture, in creating consensus on certain political aspects of the social whole” [7]. The agenda-setting theory has a more critical role in politics than in other fields because „politics at the national level, direct and personal contact with the people involved is particularly low. Most of what we know comes from the mass media. We only know those aspects of the national policy that the press considers important and interesting enough to be transmitted” [7]. Consequently, the individual „shapes his representations of the world under the pressure of the representations broadcast in the mass media” [1]. The study by the two American researchers, McCombs and Shaw, showed a correlation between the media and public agendas but could not determine which influences which.

In 1972, McCombs and Shaw developed a new study in Charlotte, North Carolina, where a much larger sample was used than for the Chapel Hill study. One of the purposes of this study was to establish the causal direction of the agenda effect. The study’s result reveals the causal relationship between the media and public agendas. G. Ray Funkhouser introduces a new element in the definition of the agenda function: „the real importance of events, measured by static indicators: crime, inflation, the armed forces engaged in the Vietnam war, etc.” [4]. For example, the fundamental importance of the Vietnam problem was measured by the number of American troops deployed. G. Ray Funkhouser „discovers that there is a strong correspondence between the public’s assessment of the importance of a subject and its coverage in the media, but he finds only a weak correspondence between these two aspects and the statistical values that fix the importance of the respective issue in actual reality” [7].

H. G. Zucker drew attention to the fact that the agenda effect fulfils different roles depending on the topical issue: „if it is distant from the public’s daily life and relatively neutral (such as ecology, the energy crisis, drugs, etc.), the role of the media in shaping the list of priorities is particularly

important; if the topic is close and sensitive (such as unemployment, the cost of living, insecurity and aggression in big cities, etc.), then the press plays a minor role in configuring the priority lists”[1]. According to Zucker, disturbing events have a separate evolution compared to non-disturbing ones, confirming the agenda effect’s thesis. Which means that „in vital issues, people depend more on extra-media factors (interpersonal relationships, cultural code, socio-economic context, affective predispositions), while in general issues, which do not directly affect them, they let themselves be guided by the representations distributed through the mass media” [1].

CONCLUSIONS

The conclusion of McCombs and Shaw regarding the political importance of the agenda-setting function is the following: “The mass media represent the main artisans of the political culture of the masses, that is, of what the masses consider to represent the political life and political concerns of the moment. Also, it is the mass media that form, for the most part, the political culture of the elites” [7]. Thus, the mass media participate in political life, constituting active agents that select, distort, and interpret the information released. The mass media add their perspective on political phenomena before broadcasting them. The media sets the agenda for both the citizens and the politicians.

J. P. Winter and C. H. Eyal drew attention to the period required for a topic to move from the media agenda to the public agenda, concluding that the closest correlation between them was 4-6 weeks. This interval was called „the period of optimal effect” [7], it can be different depending on the debate. Later, G. Stone and M. Mc Combs demonstrated that 4-8 weeks to 24 is necessary to impose an agenda on public consciousness. Information about the transition time is essential for public relations specialists, as it helps them to promote topics that are trivial in those of public opinion priority.

“The temporal dimension inherent in the process of imposing a problem as the main theme of social debates proves that the agenda effect is not the result of a sudden transformation of consciousness, but the fruit of a slow, cumulative process (with increases and decreases) of mobilising opinions around topics of general interest” [7]. The continuous character of the public space comes from homogeneity since communication is subject to the same standard of validity. Finally, the dialogical model selects news that fits better for publication.

In general, he prefers to approach the image to support the media message. In other words, an image consistent with a speech represents a form of complete communication. If the dialogical model was part of the rationalist tradition, the propagandistic model emphasises the theological function coming from great political myths. As a communication zone, the public space is also continuous and homogeneous, but it is a fusion of auditors listening to an actor. Consequently, the propaganda receiver appears not as an individual subject but as a collective dominated by the leader’s emotions. Regarding communication modes, the propagandist model presents itself as the

symmetrical opposite of the dialogical model; the discourse is contaminated by power, becoming dynamic, which, through its content, achieves propaganda.

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