

# COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC OPINION

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**Abstract:** In today's society, the mass-media has an increasingly presence within our life. For almost one century, the radio, then the television and today the Internet, have come alongside the printed press which lasts for a long time. Today is the moment when we should ask ourselves whether mass-media has a good or bad influence upon us and upon our thinking; the moment to ask about the real abilities of the mass-media to change the public opinion and the individual opinions of the media aspects consumers. We could even say that the mass-media uses to strengthen our pre-existing opinions, rather than changing them. More than this, the mass-media doesn't act directly. The resulting idea is that the public is neither passive, nor isolated; the citizen is intelligent enough to form his/her own opinion and this eliminates the possibility of a general manipulation, still, it doesn't exclude the exterior influences.

The mass-media bears the responsibility of adding colorful aspects to our world's perception by choosing the way in which the transmitted information is treated.

Within a world of communication and information, the sense of supremacy takes the first place. Even though people are human beings who like to communicate and who take part in a social group, they are animated by the idea of being the best, of showing progress and of being distinguishable. The concept of supremacy is being met at many levels: individual, organizational, institutional and even inter-state level.

May we speak about a mass-media supremacy starting from this point? Speaking with regard to the mass-media, these are considered to be mass communication's instruments. Nowadays, it is not only considered a powerful control instrument for guidance, but also an innovating tool in our modern society. Moreover, it is an integrating part in the quotidian life of every person; this means that its impact is much more important.

At a society level, the public opinion is the result of a game of changes and of communication between two different actors, a game which takes place in different environments: family, work, school, syndicate etc. The mass-media, as well as the journalists, occupy a preponderant place in these environments. Their mission is to bring the event and the reality to sight and at the same time they represent the mirror of the opinion itself.

Specialists consider mass-media to be the main public opinion builder and its forms can be distinguished by the following criteria: the quickness of the transmitted information through the competition regarding the first information where the sensationalist takes the first place. The journalists, the mediators of the message, take the role in publishing news to present reality to its nearest form of truthfulness.

With regard to news and information, they have to be accurately presented, without the author's interpretation that could modify their content. However, following this case, one may resort to the truth criterion. Regarding news, information or value judgments, another criterion should be applied, the criterion of sincerity. It is necessary

to stress the fact that the independency of the publications, of the radio broadcasts and of the television stations, conditions the objectivity of the information, but at the same time it is not the guarantor of news' quality.

The prestige of a publication or of a radio or TV network depends on the professional way through which the information is treated, and on its objectivity. The communication specialists have raised theories concerning the public opinion, the mass-media and their influence upon the individual. Patrick Champagne states that: "The reporters stand just for opinion's spokesmen ... and do no more than attesting in high manner the low thoughts of the people".

The mass-media institutions occupy a certain position within society. This is why the publisher has increased from the stage of a simple and occasional events' observer to the stage of an analyst and interpreter who exercises a big influence upon the public opinion. The objective of the mass-media is to satisfy the human interest, to inform correctly and in real-time, and to catch big audiences. The real problem they are confronted with, remains the selection between what should be published, transmitted, communicated and what stays apart.

Which are the qualities requested for an information to be valuable? Concerning the way in which the information in a publication is presented, this should respect the same professional ethics, just like all mass-media forms. The precision, the exactness, the responsibility, the oblique verification of the sources, the impartiality, the neutrality, the respect toward the reader, the ethics, are only a few elements which are respected by the institutions in their activity. One of the most important condition is the credibility; without it, the success chances would be infinitesimal, nevertheless, the mass communication media are part of the market and thus it becomes even harder to decide what should be published and what should not.

In the present times, the publisher bears a resemblance to a carousel of 'latest news'. The supposition replaces the truth and the 'latest news' remains only an ephemera which survives only until the following news appears. The fact that the mass-media is sometimes subject to different compulsion aspects, make us believe that the things of great importance are: information selection criterion, their value of actuality and the activity of selection and editing the information.

However these rigors are restricted to the necessity of an on-going production, to the realization of a certain mass-media products unpublished, easy to recognize and of present interest. To these, one may also add the diminution of the emission time, the resource crisis etc. In our cultural society, the mass-media is more and more active within our life. For almost a century, the radio, the television and today the internet have come alongside the printed press which lasts for a long time. Therefore, it is necessary to ask ourselves whether mass-media has a good or bad influence upon us and upon our thinking.

In "Media Processed and Effects" L.W. Jeffers stresses the idea that television and mass-media make visible the perceptions about reality, that they represent behaviour models which teach us the way we should behave in different situations, how can we solve personal crises , how can we evaluate the institutions, the professions etc. The mass-media show us what is important and what is not; what is fair, right, moral and what is not; it represents values which are considered to be representative for some public categories, whether total or partial.

The mass-media becomes an agent of the social control, an integrating and homogenous factor. Its force shouldn't be ignored because it could impose or eliminate

some experiences or types of relations. At the same time, the mass-media provides information for the society, brings to sight some phenomena and events; it amplifies or intensifies some aspects of reality; it restrains or minimizes some other aspects of it. The mass-media could create attitudes and values which inspire behaviours and according to Gerbner, it can create the recipient's conception of reality, giving rise to a cultural environment and to an illusory world. The communication mediums make a connection to a world where the receivers don't have direct access by projecting a standard image of reality which is disseminated into many copies.

We can not simply ignore the mass-media's power because there is a distinction between the image of the world, of reality and the image which is projected or imposed by the mass-media. It is almost impossible to form a personal opinion because there is a restrained access to the event, there is no other solution but to accept the proposed alternative. The impact which mass-media has upon the shaping of a public opinion represents an important aspect.

Walter Lipmann, american editor and columnist, considers that "the press neither covers nor reflects the main social phenomena in a representative way". Starting from this point, one may assume that the publishers interpret the events in such a way that the public opinion gets shaped into different directions.

Therefore, the mass-media, the creator of public opinion, influences indirectly and unconsciously every individual who adopts these points of view.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, not only newspapers, but also the radio, the television and the cinema participated to the democratic debates. The development of the Internet also contributes to the propagation and dissemination of the democratic ideas. The emergence of the new technologies incites the democratic organizations to modify their working manner by bringing the political class closer to the citizens. In this case, the mass-media completes the traditional values of democracy by inventing new types of informing or expressing.

The ensemble of the diffuse information stands for an essential way of the democrat actors' expression and plays a considerable role in forming the public opinion. By placing some debates on a scene, they could hide some others.

Thus, the actors are submissive to some ethics: the precision of the information, the respect for a personal life, the examination of the sources.

Other tools which influence or deform the citizens' behaviours are the opinion polls.

The objectivity of the opinion polls which is brought into the discussion by the mass-media is not a new problem. In general, the interpretation of the opinion polls' results differs depending on the intern specific causes. It is not the role of the opinion polls to satisfy everybody. There will be always some groups who will support the 'veracity of the results' and who will explain the actions through the results of the respective opinion polls. At the same time, there may be some groups who will believe that the same opinion polls are not trustworthy or that the results might have been modified and do not correspond to the reality.

We may specify the fact that we cannot approve the idea of the opinion polls' institutes to be occult laboratories which try to manipulate or influence the public opinion. The opinion polls are actually realized by a command to which the domain is specified and to which only a part of the results is published; the press filter the information and publish what consider being "news".

When referring to the studies ordered by the “politic”, the opinion polls stand for an information source; they “take photos” of the society at a given moment. Their role as a tool of pressure or influence is malefic. Two problems may be discussed when referring to the role of the opinion polls: the credibility and the objectivity. The credibility of the opinion polls is connected with the credibility of the Institute in the eye of the public opinion but it takes time to be built up. An institute which is involved in different scandals won’t succeed in building prestige. Coming from this point of view, the market opinion polls will be confronted with a serious problem: the one of credibility. Even if the institutes have redoubtable specialists, there are many well-known cases when they attracted media criticism because of some delicate problems.

Second, an opinion poll should represent an intellectual effort and from a methodological point of view it should be a totally objective one. Questions of this type should not be made: “Could the results of the opinion polls be manipulated?”, “Who is behind the ‘x’ institute?” The only question which should be addressed is: “What kind of methodology was used?”. The discussions regarding the realization of an opinion poll should be made only with specialists.

Most of the times, the mass-media lack the methodological explanations, the structure and the type of the sample and sometimes the beneficiary. Beyond the methodological objectivity exists an objectivity which is imposed by an already existing “model”. The results which will come against the model will be considered a “counter” and will be consequently denied.

We have noticed that the mass-media facilitates rapid and complete information, but sometimes we risk getting our opinions dictated by the presented ones. Thus, we have to remain watchful and to put our discoveries under the mark of relativity.

The mass-media signify a practical instrument if we detain the capacity to affirm our opinions and if we know what to expect.

The communication, a fundamental human right we exercise the whole life, should serve the social inclusion and should permit, in order to achieve common well, to express the conflicts and the differences within an open dialogue for every opinion.

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