

# PRESS INFORMATION, FROM OBJECTIVITY TO MANIPULATION (I)

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## Abstract

Postmodern audience is looking for its identity in front of the TV set, and this identity becomes common to those who consume the same audio-visual products. Therefore, media has the power to create a social identity. The present-day individual is the victim of stress, of a hectic and tense life and this is why he looks for something relaxing and unwinding in TV programme, in order to forget for a few hours about everyday worries. Television takes full advantage of this situation and offers the public the amount of entertainment that it requires. However, hid behind this situation are the true intentions of those who direct and coerce using media: manipulation and misinformation.

**Keywords:** *mass media, public, manipulation, opinion poll, persuasion*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A first step towards being listened could be the exordium, defined<sup>1</sup> as the first part of a speech which aims at attracting the public's attention and good will. To try to persuade when there is a distance between the orator and the public means to tailor your argumentation in order to establish a bridge. Usually, being convinced does not represent a response to an initial request, thinks Philippe Breton, professor at the Journalism Centre at the University of Strasbourg. According to Breton, "exordium is also a way of giving birth to this request, of making it legitimate. Therefore, the public is offered enough reason to listen to what is going to follow<sup>2</sup>".

After you capture attention, the intent to manipulate might have more success. According to *Oxford Dictionary of Politics*, published by Oxford University Press in 2009, manipulation means influencing a person, a group of people or a situation in order to obtain a benefit or to form an opinion or belief in an indirect, incorrect, dishonest, but intelligent and scrupulous manner.

This usually implies propaganda, especially when it is targeted to more than one person. A manipulator will use arguments which he does not believe in, refuses or distorts relevant information, or "plays" with the person's mind using emotions.

In the *Sociology Dictionary* coordinated by Cătălin Zamfir and Lazăr Vlăsceanu, published by the Babel Bucharest Publishing House in 1998, manipulation is defined as an action through which a social actor is determined to think, act and act in a way that is compatible with the interests of the initiator, and not with his own, using persuasive techniques that intentionally distort the truth, creating the impression of freedom of thought and decision.

Unlike the influence triggered by the rationale conviction, using manipulation you do not aim at a better and more profound understanding of the situation, but at breaching a convenient agreement. We therefore refer to misleading the individual using false arguments and using non-rationale emotional influences. All this time, the bad intentions of the message transmitter remain indistinguishable to its receiver.

## 2. FORMS OF THE MANIPULATION ACTION

Herman Parret, doctor of philosophy at the Leuven University in Belgium, proposed in his volume *Prolégomènes à la théorie de l'énonciation. De Husserl à la pragmatique*, published at the Berne Publishing House in 1987, six primary forms of the manipulation action.

1. Manipulation determined by the contact between the world of objects and the manual action, representing the initial meaning of the manipulation action

2. Manipulation determined by the interaction between the physical action and the world of beliefs, a physical constraint to change an option or belief.

3. Manipulation determined by the interaction between the physical action and the world of actions, a change of action imposed by a physical action.

4. Manipulation resulted from the impact between the discursive action and the world of objects, when one can change the ideas about nature and works of art.

5. Manipulation resulted from the interaction between the discursive action and the world of beliefs – the media discourse or that of some preachers might change beliefs.

6. Manipulation as a result of the relationship between the discursive action and the world of actions – for example, the discursive intervention of the electoral communication determines a change in the electoral options.

Professor Constantin Sălăvăstru considers that only the last three forms of manipulation are attested as such. He makes the distinction between the immediate or direct manipulation and the media or indirect manipulations. In the first case we deal with changing the current states and beliefs using the physical action of the action agent. In the case of the media manipulations, the changing of the objects, beliefs and actions is accomplished using discursive interventions<sup>3</sup>.

Besides these forms of manipulation we also have the positive and negative ones. Constantin Sălăvăstru states that positive manipulation is characterised by the fact that the means used to trigger beliefs, ideas or actions are in accordance with the norms of the rationality and in consensus with the norms of morality and they act in favour of the common good and in the support of the general interest<sup>4</sup>.

In the case of negative manipulation, if it is unintentional, we deal with ignorance. If it is intentional, then we deal with lie.

The sociologists Vasile Tran and Irina Stănciugelu claim, in the volume *Pathologies and communicational therapies* that the manipulator is substituting his will to the manipulator, ravishes his free will, either by offering false foundations for an apparently free decision, or by exploiting

the fundamental needs (of information, integration or assertion) and the social reflexes, either by including emotions and rallying the individual or collective subconscious.

The two sociologists say that there are types of communication with an exclusively pathologic character, and in this category one can include the manipulations that consist of propaganda, misinformation, intoxication and imposture. There are also some types of communication that tend to gain a pathologic character: the lie, the rumour, the polemic, the negotiation and the publicity.

The evolution of the manipulation techniques requires the development of some precise codes, identifiable only by professionals and completely inaccessible to tyros<sup>5</sup>. Basically, one of the fundamental reasons of communication is to convince the receptor of a certain opinion, therefore strengthening or changing his attitudes. Firstly, one must identify the factors of the communication process that can trigger this change.

The message that aims at changing the receptor's attitude is called a persuasive message. Research in this field showed that the reaction to the message depends on the characteristics of the person which tries to persuade, without having anything to do with the value of the message. Therefore three characteristics have been established, that publically influence in such a situation: the credibility of the communicator, the physical qualities and the attractiveness or the charisma. In *The sociology of the public opinion*, Ștefan Buzărnescu claims that manipulation means clandestine persuasion. On many times, the one who is manipulated does not know that a persuasive influence is being exerted upon him, being even less aware of the source's desired purposes. "The intention to persuade, to make the others adopt another point of view or to stop them from adopting another opinion belongs to the communication process"<sup>6</sup>, states Ștefan Buzărnescu, professor of Social Sciences at the West University of Timișoara.

Persuasion is efficient when the influence is exerted at all three levels: cognitive, affective, and behavioral.

When talking about manipulation through communication, we cannot avoid the concept of

sophism referring to the TV discourse. According to the same *Oxford Dictionary of Politics*, the sophism represents a deliberately presented false argument.

Constantin Sălăvăstru, in the work *The Art of Public Debates*, acknowledges the fact that there are enough situations in which the participants in the communication relationship consciously and intentionally use an incorrect reasoning, hoping that the interlocutor will not discover it and that he will accept the conclusion. In other cases ambiguous or obscure phrases are used with the hope that the interlocutor will not understand their meaning and he will accept a particular point of view. Other participants use authoritarian attitudes hoping that they will diminish the interlocutor's critical ardour or his availability to use other viewpoints when it comes to the discussion topic. In his opinion, these are intentional communication errors, which support a phenomenon called manipulation<sup>7</sup>.

The use of communication errors in public debates has a very simple explanation. Sălăvăstru considers that every participant in the communication relationship stakes, when he evaluates his chances of winning, on other people's ignorance. This ignorance assumes not knowing some subtle element of rationalization, such as the difference between a correct and incorrect reasoning, and not knowing some of the more complicated elements of semantics such as value, meaning and the explanation of some terms. Ignorance can also be triggered by the lack of knowledge when it comes to the complexity of the para-verbal language that refers to tonality, phrasing or intonation, and to the non-verbal language which deals with gestures or posture. All these aspects are very well presented by Platon in *The Sophist*: "Not to imagine that there is also when it comes to argumentations an art which puts you in the situation of deceiving the youngsters and those that are not yet familiarized with the truth of things, using argumentations that address the hearing, having a sort of verbal images of all things going through their faces, therefore creating the impression that the truth is being told and that he, the speaker, is the most erudite person of all and in all respects?"<sup>8</sup>

There is also a perspective which says that television acts more accordingly the logic of seduction than that of manipulation. Martine Joly, honoured professor at the University of Bordeaux, France, claims that the televisual discourse, which is addressed to an emotional and vast public, belongs more to the myth than to logic, meaning that it answers to an induce logic of seduction by the logic of the market. In other words, "television is not false and manipulative, but simply devastating because it is seductive"<sup>9</sup>.

### 3. THE OPINION POLL

Influencing public opinion, using mass-media in order to gain something represents the political aim that, beneath the image of democracy, manipulates according to whim. Here, some explanations have to be given in order to understand how the instruments of democracy can be used against the people, in a free society, having their approval and encouragement.

In the first place, the concept of public opinion is controversial and it implies various approaches. On the one hand, the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu considers that public opinion does not exist. The democratic formation of a public opinion is in the center of the public space, but the practice of polls and mass media led to a crisis of the system of representativeness. At this moment, the poll has, according to Bourdieu, the role to impose the illusion that there is a public opinion resulted from adding some individual opinions. On the other hand, the French sociologist Dominique Wolton<sup>10</sup> says that public opinion represents the relatively loyal reflection of different opinion trends that go through the present-day and the most democratic means of regulating the citizen's choice.

A brief history on the notion of public opinion shows that it has three states. The first state takes place between the French Revolution and the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and designates an opinion of the social elite in a new field, that of the open political struggle and of electoral competition. In that period the public opinion was the opinion of Members of Parliament, and not that of the simple citizens.

Such a vision will be modified gradually. Firstly, the universal masculine vote appears, through which the people is directly involved in the political game, and not just the elite, and this take place in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time there is enthusiasm within the popular press which will lead to the appearance of a mighty character which plays a significant role in defining the second state of public opinion. "This new character is the journalist, who uses his articles and leading articles in order to contribute to imposing discussion topics and to create "public opinions" simply by defining them"<sup>11</sup>", says Patrick Champagne, member of The European Center for Sociology Studies in Paris.

The development of the radio in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century goes also in the same direction, strengthening even more the building power of opinion used by popular mass media.

Starting from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century we refer to the third stage of public opinion, the complex and insecure product of the fight between three different actors: the politician, the journalist and the voter.

Together with the development of a true poll industry, the notion of public opinion will go through another transformation. Polling institutes, which only claim to measure public opinion, impose their conception about public opinion, an opinion requested by the political spectrum.

Media communication belongs to a global situation in which there is a technologic support (scripto-visual for written press, audio for radio and audio-visual for television) placed on a secondary transmission channel between the transmission and reception instances. There is a meeting point for the two processes – interpretation on which the social significance is being built.

Patrick Charaudeau, professor of Language Science at XIII University in Paris, draws attention in the volume *Les medias et l'information: l'impossible transparence du discours*<sup>12</sup> on the means of mass communication and he claims that they do not represent a power instance. Even though we cannot deny the fact that media is not estranged from the different games of the social power, it cannot represent the supreme power because power doesn't ever depend on a

single individual. The context represents the instance that gives the individual power.

Charaudeau considers that in the case of media communication, the purposefulness should be to offer information. In this context, the media contract establishes a connection between a production instance, formed of media professionals, generally called journalists, and a reception instance, formed of receptors represented by readers, listeners and viewers.

Therefore, we have a journalistic instance and a receiving instance. In the case of the journalistic instance, whose social role is to deliver the information, one should state that it is not the creator of events, it only collects them. There is another characteristic of the journalistic identity, that of information foresight, but here the journalist comes across three problems. One of the problems is whether or not to broadcast the events that might become information: journalists are limited in their activity either by the number of information they can offer, or by the technological constraints related to space and time. Another difficulty is that the journalist cannot be present everywhere in the world where something is going on, and so he uses different sources that, usually, have to be thoroughly checked. The third difficulty refers to the situation of the socio-economic competition, which forces the media organization to limit itself from one situation to another.

These three types of problems urge the journalist to proceed to a mass selection of facts, and the main criterion for this selection is time: the up-to-date information will always come first. This selection role determines a series of incidents, from a communication and information contract viewpoint.

On the other hand, as we said before, there is a receiving instance which plays the social role of reader, listener or viewer in order to be informed. Sociological surveys try to define the profile of the readers, listeners or viewers. Some targets are being established according to the political opinions, profession, social class or age, but they turn out to be heterogeneous and unstable.

In conclusion, one can say that the journalist broadcasts information to an undefined public and it over-evaluates its level of interest,

ignorance, desire or faith. In this situation, and taking into account the mass media economic competition, the journalist aims at addressing, attracting and captivating a numerous public. Accordingly, in order to define information media communication, Patrick Chareaudau starts from two contracts<sup>13</sup>:

- an information contract which refers to selecting facts according to the competing position and the attempt to answer the following question: "What is going on here and elsewhere?";
- a capture contract which refers to the manner in which the broadcast is being performed, according to the characteristics of the receptors.

The capture contract is based on two principles:  
 - a principle of seriousness - in order to have this information contract acknowledged by the receiving instance the information has to be trustworthy. This principle states that information has to be checked.

- a principle of "making himself pleasant", in order to move and seduce the public.

These two principles (seriousness - credibility, pleasure - spectacle) and the double contract (information/capture) help placing the media communication of information on a device presented as a "science rendering machine"<sup>14</sup>, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The situation of media communication

Media communication situation				
Information contract				
<u>Events</u>	<u>Production instance</u>	<u>Approach</u>	<u>Receiving instance</u>	<u>Action</u>
table of facts;	Journalists	credibility	Readers; Listeners; viewers	Informing

The sociologist Patrich Champagne considers that the present-day political opinion production way represents the result of a ruling inside the social fields<sup>15</sup>.

Together with the appearance of media communication, of polls and of marketing, communication has interfered with the practical transformations inside the fields of any nature. Started almost half century ago, polls are designed to be used especially within the political field, but at the same time they are subject to constant criticism. The main problem is the conscience manipulation of public opinion. And discussions about the scientific validity of the polls have moved mostly to the political worlds, and those who were reluctant about polls have been accused, on a number of occasions that they are the enemies of democracy and of the universal vote.

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