

PRESS INFORMATION, FROM OBJECTIVITY TO MANIPULATION (II)

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Abstract

Postmodern public looks for its identity in front of the TV screen, and identity becomes common for the consumers of the same audio-visual products. In this way, media has the power to create social identity. The individual of our days is the victim of stress, of an agglomerated and tensioned life, so that what he looks for in TV shows is relaxation, ease, leaving aside, for at least a few moments, his daily problems. TV media takes full advantage of this situation, offering to its audience the amusement it requires. Unfortunately, hidden behind are the real intentions of the ones who control and compel by means of mass media: manipulation and false information.

Keywords: *mass-media, public, manipulation, public poll, persuasion.*

In the present political context, polls have become a business whose results often turn against those who ordered them. The most famous case is that registered during the presidential elections in Romania when, on December 6, 2009, exit-polls gave as undisputable winner the representative of the Social Democratic Party, Mircea Geoană, with 52% of votes. However, only a few hours later, as counting of votes advanced, the situation was radically changed in favor of candidate Traian Băsescu, who acceded to the highest position in the state with 50.33% of all votes. Such polls, besides pushing politicians to make desperate and awkward gestures, disconcert the electorate, are also extremely expensive, so that a critical point has been reached, the one in which the polling companies come to be selected not on professional, but on clientage criteria.

And yet, returning to the beginnings of public poll, the actors on the political stage should accept that it expresses "what the people think" in a much more precise manner. As a matter of fact, the practice of public polls is strongly related to the political system and to the notion of public opinion. Patrick Champagne sustains that the

specific force of those who realize polls is of political and not – as they believe – of scientific nature. "More exactly, their force lies in the fact that they try to appear as scientific works for attaining political, essentially practical scopes. One may say that they play two roles: they develop their inquiries in the so-called idea of democracy as they pretend they permit everyone to speak, however, ethnically, they realize them only to prefigure the results of some future electoral votings" (P. Champagne, 2002, p. 21).

To conclude with, specialists in polls rather serve the political system than analyze it, as they pretend. This might also refer to the significant manipulation exercised by the practice – rather unconscious than conscious - of public polls. The studies of Patrick Champagne show that the practice of polls begins by manipulating those who use them, as well as politologists, political representatives and journalists, who believe that polls are of interest for knowing what public opinion thinks without asking, however, what actually public opinion is.

Apparently, manipulation begins in the moment of questions' elaboration, continuing with the manner of interpreting the received responses. As a matter of fact, manipulation begins prior to the realization of the questionnaire, by the simple fact that some groups of people, whose opinions are apparently recorded, are created.

To interrogate some group for knowing what does or what thinks it means to attribute to it a social existence, namely to transform it into an entity characterized by personality and a will of its own. Or, nothing is give, everything is built upon (G. Bachelard, 2001, p.58). In such a case, what is public opinion: the large groups of people mobilized around some ideal or the silent

groups of majority, namely those who never say anything and who have no public attitude? Also, why should be the will of the public opinion taken into consideration, to the extent to which one may assume that it expresses popular will? One could equally admit that public opinion is wrong and that, prior to be consulted, he needs to be informed and even educated.

Journalism has become a major strategic place in which this symbolic new type of battle is fought, and whose results are registered by poll operators. It is the place where public opinion is being formed, as recorded in public inquiries. According to Patrick Champagne, communication counselors and PR specialists whose number is, quite surprisingly, two times higher than that of journalists, prepare the "effects of the news" and the "mediatic blows" of the politicians, meant at shocking the readers, and at suggesting them one opinion or another, for their subsequent recording by poll operators.

Consequently, recorded in the polls is not the real opinion of the population on some topic of major interest, but the opinion of the political class, as well as staging by means of media, for convincing the people to express what the political class actually wants, thus increasing its legitimate character.

In other words, the so-called inquiries of opinion measure the visibility of the mediatic actions and appreciate the extent of approval or disapproval in relation with the proposed messages, for adjusting - according to an individual logic characteristic rather to advertising than to democracy - a political message devoid of any reality.

In his volume *"Homo videns, imbecilizarea prin televiziune și post - gândirea (Homo videns, or making people stupefied by TV and post-thinking)"*, issued at Humanitas Publishing House in 2006, Giovanni Sartori, professor of Philosophy and Political Sciences at the universities of Florence, Italy, and Columbia, New York, asks himself how is public opinion really forming? If, on one side, one accepts that public opinion is the assembly of opinions shared by some public, belonging to that public and representing general interests, then one should also accept that the term "opinion" does not mean knowledge and science, being only a belief, an expression of a

subjective opinion which needs no proofs, as stated by the German philosopher and sociologist Jurgen Habermas in his study *Storia e critica dell'opinione pubblica*, issued at Laterza Publishing House of Bari, in 1971. In other words, opinions are only feeble and changing convictions, whereas democracy means ruling of the opinion.

The main issue here to discuss is the manner in which an autonomous public opinion, expressing indeed public will, is to be formed. From the very beginning, it should be open to some flows of exogenous information, which it receives from the representatives of political power or from the instruments of mass-information. Present here is, however, the risk of a possible "hetero-controlled" opinion (G. Sartori, 2006. p. 52). Giovanni Sartori considers that "as long as public opinion has been mainly shaped by newspapers, the balance between an autonomous opinion and the heteronomic (hetero-controlled) ones was granted by the existence of a free and multiple press, expressing several points of view. The all-embracing presence of radio broadcasting did not substantially modify this equilibrium. The real problem is represented by television, and by the extent to which it substitutes the word" (G. Sartori, 2006. pp. 52 - 54).

As long as linguistic communication is prevailing, the processes of forming the opinion of the public are not directly oriented from bottom to the top, instead they occur "in cascade", more precisely in a succession of cascades interrupted by basins, in which opinions get mixed, as explained by Sartori. Accordingly, the opinions of each of us are reported to certain reference groups, being not formed exclusively from informational messages, but also from identification elements.

The invention of TV image breaks this equilibrium, attained in time. Practically, television takes the place of the so-called intermediary leaders of opinion, as asserted by Sartori, and eliminates the multitude of "cognitive authorities" established in various manners, for each of us, namely in whom are we to believe, who is worthy of our confidence and who is not.

At the same time, television imposes the authority of the image. In the opinion of Giovanni Sartori, the eye believes in what it sees, so that

the most credible cognitive authority becomes only what has been seen. This is because what is seen also appears as real and, implicitly, true. Videocracy constantly fabricates an intensely hetero-controlled opinion which apparently reinforces, but it actually devoids of meaning democracy – understood as government of the opinion. Television poses as the representative of a public opinion which is, essentially, the echo of its own voice.

Continuing the same idea, Pierre Bourdieu states that the polling institutes do not really quantify public opinion, instead they create false images which they deliver by an illegal scientific exercise. Bourdieu also mentions that, quite paradoxically, polling institutes fail to consider a “public opinion” much more real than the one created by informatic programs on paper, which discloses the “science” with the groups of interests, especially the political ones, act inside the press trusts, by means of “pressure groups” or “lobbies” (P. Bourdieu, 2007, p. 33).

Bourdieu also describes a genuine sociological theory for the fabrication of some public opinions, which are subsequently issued by press. A series of studies published in the 80’ies by the French sociologist in *Liberation magazine*, under the title *Le pouvoir des mots. Entretien avec Didier Eribon*. demonstrates that, starting from the secondary analysis of some inquiries developed by the very polling institutes on public opinion, the probability of having a so-called “personal” opinion differs as a function of the interviewed social groups. The cultural capital of an individual is measured by his education level and especially by his ability to answer a political question.

Actually, the involvement of the person agreeing to fill in the questionnaire is related to the recognition of his right of having some opinion about a certain domain to which the question refers, or to the fact that the respondent is especially interested in having an opinion. However, this interest should be supported by a series of - even minimum - information on the topic to which he wants to give a response. In most of the cases, however, he will not recognize his ignorance.

To demonstrate the lack of information of the persons who accept to fill in questionnaires for public polls, Pierre Bourdieu analyzes a political

TV show, *Face à Face*, created by producers Jean Faran and Igor Barrèr, and broadcasted between February 24 – October 3, 1966 at French public television, and later on replaced by the program *En direct avec*.

The show presented an interview taken to a political personality by a sample entity, including a polling institute formed of 20 individuals considered as representative for the French population. Bourdieu observes the changes in the behaviour of these persons along half a year, in relation with their feeling of being “invested with a mission”, and displaying the tendency of being treated as stars, once their fame increased.

If at the beginning they seemed shy and kind of incompetent, later on they gained courage and self-confidence. They started to prepare their questions before the shows and to inform themselves about the personality they were going to interview. In conclusion, these people tried to discover their competences according to the role assigned by themselves or by somebody else.

This proves once again that the attempt to produce an opinion is unequally assigned and it varies especially according to the cultural capital of each individual. Therefore, when people have to participate in a survey, they use very different ways of expressing themselves and this aspect is usually not taken into account, sometimes knowingly, by the person conducting the survey.

Survey conductors use the homogenizing technique of pre-coded questions and then they gather the answers. It’s just that these answers which are identically formulated are different in reality, because they represent the result of some different logics.

The sociological analysis of surveys, broadcasted political debates or the street demonstrations included in the media, show that we don’t speak about progress in the true sense of the word, but rather a sort of sophistication and the use of false reasoning which distort the truth, trying to gain credibility, using social technologies and trying to give the impression that, in this way, people are given the chance to speak.

Alongside this so-called progress, the political field tends to close itself, the political game being more and more in the hands of specialist who,

using surveys, claim to give the floor to the public. In reality, they use these surveys exactly like a ventriloquist who lends his voice to his puppet. Therefore, nowadays, according to Patrick Champagne, the democratic idealism less threatened by totalitarianism than by this type of scholarly demagoguery, equally dangerous because it creates the illusion of a democracy.

The Spanish writer and journalist, Ramonet warns, in the volume *Propagandes silencieuses*, which appeared at the Galilée publishing house in Paris, in 2000, about the modern communicational mechanism, which uses subtle manipulation at the global level. And this happens given that there still is an illusion that the media system plays the fundamental role of presenting the reality. Ramonet claims that in this sense the press consumer expects the journalist to return a copy of the model that life provides. However, the media reality today places us in front of the constitution function, i.e. construction of reality, presented by the information (V. Tran și I. Stănciugelu, 2007, p.68). This is no longer a neutral mirror of a fact or event, but a staging with numerous factors. The main principles of journalism have changed, Now, information means not only broadcasting in detail an event, but also a set of contextual partners which allow the reader or the viewer to understand its deep meaning. Under the influence of modern television, of its information ideology, the live broadcast now means to present the ongoing history (I. Ramonet, 2000, p. 134). Therefore, the illusion that seeing means understanding was established. This is why there is a fascination for live broadcasted images, the demand therefore justifying the supply for false documents, reenactments, manipulations and mystifications.

Due to the impact of the image, television is the one that imposes the most significant event, thus constraining the audio and the written press to follow. Here, there is the idea that the importance of the events is related to the richness of the images. Therefore, a live broadcasted event is more remarkable than the one that stays invisible and has an abstract significance.

Likewise, the appearance of the Internet shortens the time required to broadcast information. The written press seems

old-fashioned and it has to submit an event with great delay from the time of its occurrence. This is the reason why, newspapers are forced to limit themselves to presenting the events at a local scale, to mundane and business topics.

On the other hand, a fact becomes true or false because it does not comply with some objective and rigorous criteria, acknowledged by at least three sources, but simply because all the media repeat the same information. Therefore, rehearsal substitutes demonstration, and information is replaced by confirmation.

In writing news or preparing a show, the reporter has to be objective and not influenced by his own feelings. He must be fair to all people involved in the event, to offer the right to reply in the case of allegations, not to harm the image of the people involved without solid arguments, not to use children and not to reveal their identity. He mustn't try to gain information by resorting to threats and to use the authorities in a particular field in order to check some information. In drafting the text he has to use a simple, direct and easy to understand language. These rules reflect the ethics of journalism. However, these standards can easily be broken if there is no measure of common sense and if the audio-visual laws are not respected.

The lack of professionalism of the journalist or his subjective involvement in drafting a audio-video program, be it for news programs, talk-shows or entertainment, always leads to distortions of the truth. When this happens knowingly and maliciously we have to do with the action of intentional manipulation. The manipulation technique has evolved a lot in recent years, with the increasing interest in obtaining a higher profit and faster by using unfair means.

Knowing the manipulation methods of the categories of audiences that can be manipulated and last but not least, those by means of which the manipulation is achieved, should be priorities for the manager of the leading TV stations. Identifying manipulation methods and knowing the mechanisms by which menus there can be prevented the intentions to fraud the information. It should be a goal of television, either public or commercial, which, by its nature has the obligation to be objective, impartial, balanced.

These objectives are difficult to achieve by the private televisions which are self-financed and thus could be prone to compromise.

From this point of view, the public television retains its status of neutrality, the main source of funding is the television fee, state budget allocations and only in third place the advertising revenue. But in the case of the public television, accountable to the Parliament, there intervenes the political factor because TVR operates under the control of the Parliament in accordance with Law no. 41/1994. The Chairman of the Management Board is appointed by the Parliament for a period of 4 years. TVR Board of Directors consists of 13 persons designated by a majority of deputies and senators. At the end of each year, the Parliament examines the activity report of TVR. If it is rejected, automatically the Management Board is replaced. The person conducting the public television has a double quality, that of General Director of TVR and Chairman of TVR. Management Board. The appointment is made by the Committee for Culture of the Parliament. All these aspects create the premises of some editorial pressures on program makers but also on management.

To fulfill the role of public television, that is to inform accurately, fairly and impartially, the Romanian Television Society, introduced the Journalist Status of S.R.Tv. To this one there is added the law no.41 / 1994, republished, as amended and supplemented, and that of broadcasting the law 504/2002.

Despite these measures there are still many slips of professional conduct. There are not few the situations in which those who introduce elements of manipulation in television programs do not know the negative effects of such processes. Sometimes those conducting programs are manipulated and through ignorance they manipulate the audience by the way they transmit the information.

Knowing the negative effects of manipulation, every journalist has a choice: to continue to manipulate even if through action a harm is produced (and does so in the idea of a financial gain or popularity that he would could get through honest means) or to assume mistakes made, including the penalties 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 generated by excess, another by lack of sufficiency ... it tends straight to the right measure. That is why it is difficult to attain perfection; for in any thing it is difficult to reach the equilibrium, just as the center of a circle can not be determined by anyone but only by a connoisseur” (Aristotel, 1998, pp. 47 - 48).

Studies show that the media has penetrated so strongly in each of our lives that we can associate the concept to a drug that the mind and body of the consumer demand every day. It is an addiction that we often feel painfully, but which nobody wants for now to diagnose and seek an effective cure. If there was a cure, it should be a radical one and would firstly require the recognition that we are partakers of a cultural failure initiated and encouraged by means of mass communication and, especially, by the audio-visual and supported aware or not, by everyone who claims the nickname of loyal viewer. To withstand this type of media violence we should live away from all that means media, in a kind of social autism to take responsibility for our failures and accept that we are in fact the victims of a form of social violence that we I supported and encouraged.

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