

Media's Role in the Public Opinion

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Received 14.10.2014; Accepted 24.11. 2014

Abstract:

The public opinion has always existed, but its echo and influence has been increased and amplified by the tools of mass communication. The latter have extended the field of their activities from a space and time perspective, by playing a basic role in the development of democracy.

The purpose of our research is to emphasize the fact that the role of media, that is, radio, television, press and internet is essential to the creation and amplification of the public opinion. The use, misuse and deformation this media imposes on words, image or sound plays a key role in the crystallization of the public opinion. To dwell on this influence and explain it in practice, we have brought forth a survey conducted with the faculty students, the youngest users of these media.

Keywords: *media, communications, public opinion, influence.*

1. Introduction

Taking into consideration the human social character, it is clear that public opinion has always existed, though in smaller scales, but today, this opinion has a more significant influence in each individual's way of thinking and acting, it influences the elections, the decisions of Government and Parliament, etc.

2. What was the public opinion like in the past?

There is evidence of the existence of a "*public opinion*" even in different documents. During its exodus from Egypt, the Jewish people often raised their voices and protested against Moses; ancient Athena people gathered in "Agora" to discuss and decide on the banishment of people from the polis, by writing the names in a clay slab; the protests of Roman plebeians influenced quite often the government orientation.

The three above examples are clear demonstration, sometimes dramatic as well, of the public opinion which could influence on the issue solution; however, even in the past there used to exist and act an "*underground*" public opinion, which was created in an unconscious way.

This was named as the "*genesis*" or the root, source by many modern researchers. This "*underground*" public opinion is a consolidated system of ideas, behaviours, myths, common values, styles and living patterns.

It happens often that the ideal and practical choices of people are not due to rational and mature actions, but are due to national habits, of rooted customs and archaic imitations of what “*people think and do*”.

In the VII century, the English philosopher J. Locke distinguished three types of law: that of God, of State and that of public opinion (which often killed more than the other two). Not by chance, many centuries ago, Dante Allighieriput a stigma on the people comfort, by comparing them to sheep and saying “*they follow one another*”.

In modern times, discussion on public opinion is met with an increasing cultural interest, which is presented as a clear expression of the will of medium-large groups, which provide their opinion on issues of art, politics, and economy. The increase in the number of graduates, the replacement of absolute monarchy by parliamentary democratic systems, the creation of many political parties has displaced the public opinion more and more near to the politics, and, in the meantime, it has encouraged research on the education of people and the role it plays on their lives and in the development of social changes.

2.1 Public opinion nowadays

In its real meaning, public opinion is not a judgment based on deep knowledge, but a superficial evaluation, that is linked to people direct experiences and their mood. “*Opinions*” are not so strong and changeable convictions; when they change to rooted and long-term convictions, they become “beliefs”, that is, constant mental organization, coherent behaviour.

Firstly, opinions are formed from individual character and experience, from his mood and today, more than in the past, they are conditioned from the social context, from “*hidden imposers*”, especially from media. The opinion has slowly turned into “*public*”, from the interaction of mass communication tools (newspaper, magazines, radio, television, internet) with trade unions, political, cultural and religious organizations. This has encouraged researchers to speak about a mass process, for a “*civilization of the masses*”.

The opinion is considered public, for it is common for the members of important societies, where this opinion is an ideal and practical point of reference, but also in practice where different interests, passions and values compete. Public opinion is able to condition the production and sales of material goods, human way of thinking and behaving. But it is subject of different researches and becomes significantly important when it deals with politics.

Public opinion is understood as a collective expression of judgments and behaviours, therefore, it is not simply an indifferent “point of view”, but it implicates an unanimous will, which is still not important from a juridical viewpoint, but it might be through political or administrative elections or even via opinion polls. A very good example of the power of public opinion is that of the US President, George W. Bush, who decided to overpower through the army the dominance of Saddam Hussein, depending on the public opinion polls, on media and other sources, choosing to apply an

aggressive external policy. He would not have attacked the Iranian army if he would not be supported by the public opinion.

In the past century, most of the US Presidents have entirely relied on the public opinion. It should be highlighted that from many years opinion polls have multiplied, being political related, or “*ethic*” issues, such as: euthanasia, family, artificial insemination, cloning, etc. When the “*champion*” of people interviewed is honest in their replies and when the polls are economically and politically independent, the results of this surveys are useful, although not entirely reliable. When these polls are not independent and they serve different economic, political or cultural interests, they are not reliable at all and they express a deformed reality.

2.2 Public opinion throughout centuries

Public opinion has always existed, thanks to the open social nature of people. In the far past, this opinion was formed and transformed within the patriarchal family, within the tribe, within the village or the polis, that is, within the narrow space borders. Verbal broadcast of public opinion (“*tradition*”) further extended space borders, for the ideas of past generations were used again in centuries from new generations. That is why even today people are convinced that **proverbs** contain and transmit the wisdom of people that is the past public opinion. When writing was discovered, verbal tradition was accompanied by the written one, which, at first, was the privilege of a few, which influenced the rest of people not only culturally, but also religiously. With the invention of printing houses and the spread of schools, the space and time borders of the public opinion were further enlarged.

The education of all the people, the wide spread of daily and periodical newspapers, the increasing presence of radio and television, the increasing use of internet, have made it a crucial relationship that between public opinion and media. From the presence and development of the latter, society has passed from the tribal public opinion to global public opinion, from a small antique place to a virtual global place.

3. Public opinion and media, today

The fact that many countries have now turned into potential media consumers, which lately have become multiple and various (take into consideration newspapers and magazines which “*invade the libraries*”) is in itself a positive phenomenon. Everyone has the possibility to receive a pluralist information, because the communication system is like that and profit more “*cultural benefits*”. Each one of us can choose and evaluate in which of the open “*windows*” to the world he would like to gaze from.

All this is valid in theory, but practically the question arises: is media a tool for the shaping of the public opinion, does this opinion represent the whole people? It is almost the same question as the one many historians ask themselves: the development of human events depend on the choices done from the majority or from the decisions of the minority, up to “*leaders*”: dictators, generals, capitalists or new politicians? In other words, the question is whether public opinion is born, evolved and spread from the “*lower class*” or is violently and unduly imposed by the “*higher class*”?

According to JurgensHabermas, public opinion cannot be considered as public, for it lacks the freedom of forming, a lack which is due to the deforming influence played by the media. Its critical capacity is limited, because it is not led by reason, but politics, ideology and interests of social groups, economical, cultural and political ones. It is the “*opinion of the mob*” the one that has replaced the “*public opinion*”, it is quantity more preferred than quality, it is the emotional stand the one that dominated rational judgment. This is made clear especially in advertisements that flood the media and which are the “*financial food*” of the latter. Advertisements make us feel that we need something that is excessive, make us feel that a good car is needed only because a beautiful girl or a handsome man presents it: in other words, media transform desires as just, and push us towards consummation and conformism by creating the illusion that we have the freedom to choose.

It happens often that public spaces, in the level of public understanding, are identified with television studios where journalists not always “*independent*”, politicians, celebrities, experts or simply dancers, “*violently*” discuss about “*public*” issues, showing no respect for one another, and with no rational and unbiased reasoning. And all this talk happens in a studio, filled with a public and is not representative at all, whereas another public, that at home, which is representative, cannot participate. Therefore, this television area remains for a long time the most privileged place in the forming of the public opinion.

In today’s mass society, the process of public opinion forming does not happen consciously, but there comes the need for an “*opinion leadership*”, which selects some topics or issues that belong to the majority of the society, and later promotes them and organizes public debates on them. Therefore, it is needed a representative, whether it is an individual, group or organization, which takes over the progress of public opinion forming. This role is often played by television hosts, such as Bruno Vespa, Maurizio Costanzo, Giuliano Ferrara in Italy, or Blendi Fevziu or Sokol Balla etc. in Albania. Consequently, opinions on media are multiple and different, but I could choose only two for an evaluating balance. One of them is that of Niklas Luhmann:

“We know media that much as not to trust them. We defend by doubting them on manipulation, which does not cause significant consequences, because the wisdom coming from the media is consciously terminated in a self-enforcing process. All our knowledge are dubious, but, despite this, we need to be based and contact them”. (Luhmann, 1978)

Another opinion comes from JurgensHabermas:

“A public opinion is easily created if it comes from a rational discussion done by different streams of public opinion, which confront one another and not by emotions, vague ideas or opinions that are enforced to get a national character, such as those shared by the media. Because of this, we need to be convinced that today the affirmation of the public opinion is more difficult”. (Habermas, 1974)

Public opinion is spread and powered even more with the spread of culture and education. It has also become the subject of research for its close relation to democracy, that is a political regime even more present in our lives and that is mainly based on public opinion.

3.1 Relationship between media and public opinion in postmodern society

The opinion of many researchers and experts is that this binomial is the essence of political and social processes which characterize our daily life.

“In a society, every member belongs to two communication networks: individual (personal relationship) and institutional network as he is a media consumer. The discussion on media and public opinion is often done separately, as if dealing with two systems with parallel meanings. In reality, public opinion cannot be treated separated from media” (Lazar, 1995: 4)

In order to understand properly the role and function of the media in our society, we need to discover the origin of modern society and highlight the historical-social relation that exists between the creation of mass media communication tools, creation of public opinion and the theory of democracy. Every one of them could not be studied and understood if we do not consider it in relation to the others. German researcher Habermas brings forth the hypothesis that to explain the nature of modern society – a conglomeration of bourgeois revolution, evolution of capitalism, democracy and evolution of press – it is necessary to explain the concept of *public sphere*. Habermas aims to identify a new social space, which is ranked among civil society (where it belongs) and State, in the framework of which civilians – new bourgeois, Illuminati intellectuals, etc. – have the right to organize a public discussion, also to benefit the education of a collective orientation and a “*general will*”, the right to reflect the process of decision-making and to control power. Therefore, there cannot exist democracy without a public sphere, not have a rational confrontation and benefit rights without a public space, which everyone can access.

Public opinion is able to put in practice, publicly practice and express the consequences of its orientation. Another researcher, Thompson, in his description of media features claims that: “*They make possible the circulation in public of symbolic forms. The benefits of media industry are open to everyone principally. The fact that everyone can access the media products makes the latter a public benefit, in the meaning that they are good and open to the public.*” (Thompson, 1998: 49-50)

In fact, media create the conditions that from one side there is created a *speakers’ public*, which is able to represent its ideas and go beyond the created confrontation, shortening thus the time of spreading knowledge and idea, political stands, speeding up the circulation of opinions; whereas, on the other side, there is also created a *reader public (or television audience)*, which are far from one another from a space and time perspective, but through *texts* (printed pages of audiovisual sequences), these borders are reduced enabling that for the first time everyone can access the public sphere. From this point of view, the relation that exists between media and public opinion is an essential one.

In order to check and verify this essential relationship, we presented our students the below question that will lead us to the conclusions:

4. Conclusions:

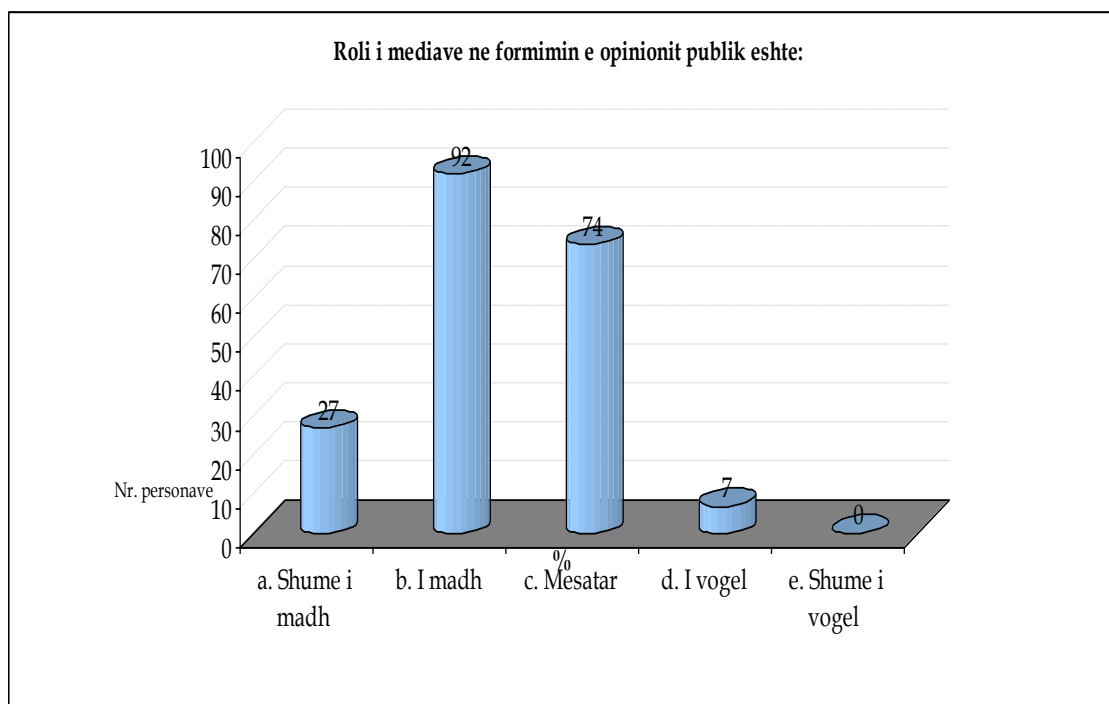
To be able to be coherent with the present and not remain simply theoretical, we decided to conduct a survey¹ to see what the youth, the generation that follows and uses media thought about this issue. The answer we did them was:

The role of media on public opinion is: (circle one of the alternatives)

- a. Greatly significant
- b. Significant
- c. Medium
- d. Not so significant
- e. Insignificant

| Answers: | Nr.of people |
|------------------------|---------------------|
| a. Greatly significant | 27 |
| b. Significant | 92 |
| c. Medium | 74 |
| d. Not so significant | 7 |
| e. Insignificant | 0 |

¹ For this survey, which was conducted in March 2009, we have interviewed 200 students of every grade of the Faculty of Foreign Languages in the University of Tirana.



As it can be seen from the results, the option with most of the answers is **b**(significant). Therefore, from 200 students asked, 92 of them (or 46%) think that the media plays a significant role in the forming of public education, whereas 74 of them (or 37%) think this role is of medium significance. As media is the main source of information and the main tool of its circulation, of course, they play a significant assistance in the public opinion. I share the same opinion that media plays a significant role in the public opinion, because for a large public (referring to the majority of the Albanian public) they are the only “window” to the outer world. With regards to the answer **a**. (13.5%) and answer **d**. (3.5%) I do not agree with any of them, for I acknowledge that the individual should have some freedom not be entirely influenced from media, but I believe that the influence of the latter is something more than just “not so significant”. As for **e**. (0%), it speaks for itself, or to say it better, it stays mum.

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