

PUBLIC OPINION AND MASS MEDIA

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Summary

Concern for public opinion grew with the political economy of the early modern era, and it was further enhanced by the modern electoral system in which the locus of public opinion played a critical role in the strategic planning of the candidates. In a representative democracy, public opinion is conceived as a vital input to a political system that is supposed to produce desired public policies as its outcome. Public opinion, however, is not an independent entity out there in a society; rather it should be treated also as an outcome of political socialization, political manipulation, and the very site for hegemonic power struggle.

Exact delineation of the domain of the public is in itself highly political given that various factors such as inputs from political leaders and the mass media both have vested interests in maintaining and/or changing the status quo of the present political system.

The public is a collection of individuals who form and express opinions on a specific issue at a particular time through available media. Public opinion, thus, is transmitted *and* constructed by the mass media. The development of public opinion is thought to be dependent upon the advancement of communication technologies. Technological advancement of the medium of expression—from printed media (book and newspaper) to

electronic media (radio and television), and to digital media (computer and internet) marked milestones in the ways public spheres are conceived and advocated in each instance. Nevertheless, the global gap in the proliferation of the hardware among the global population needs to be recognized and properly addressed; for mass media may influence not only what we think about but also how we think about the social issue and more broadly and importantly, social reality in general.

1. Introduction

The importance of public opinion cannot be ignored by any political regime that claims to be democratic. Because of its potential for legitimizing any given political regime—even scholars cannot seem to agree upon a single definition—any attempt to define it becomes not only a scientific undertaking and must necessarily take into account its ideological and political nature. Exact delineation of the domain of the public is in itself highly political given that various factors such as inputs from political leaders and the mass media both have vested interests in maintaining and/or changing the status quo of the present political system. Take for example a seemingly simple conventional definition of public opinion as “an aggregate of the individual views, attitudes, and beliefs about a particular topic, expressed by a significant proportion of a community”. It aims to be objective and straightforward and devoid of ideological undertaking, yet further analysis of the definition reveals methodological reductionism and a remarkably naïve attitude toward the social and symbolic dimensions of the term. Questions such as: Does an aggregate of “private” opinions automatically transform them into “public opinion?” Is the boundary between the private and the public fixed and transparent? How do individuals arrive at “his/her” opinion in the first place? How does public opinion influence the world that one lives in?—These are relevant and provocative questions that may begin to encroach on fundamental questions that surround the study of public opinion and mass media.

2. Historical Overview

The beginnings of what we later refer to as public opinion is seen as far back as ancient Egypt, Babylonia and Assyria, classical Greece, and Roman Empire. Early on, the ability of political leaders to influence people was regarded as an asset, with face-to-face personal communication and oratory as the means by which they exercised their skill. With technological advancement of the medium of expression—the media, concern for public opinion increased. Not surprisingly, the invention of the printing machine in 1454 by J. Gutenberg was viewed as a major threat to the ruling establishment of the medieval system. Both religious and secular rulers in Europe were well aware of the power of the printed media. Jacques Necker, finance minister of Louis XVI, made the term public opinion popular in his writings prior to the French Revolution. The French ruler, Charles IX, issued an imperial decree in 1563 prohibiting printing of any kind without special permission from the king while Pope Paul IV issued the Index of Prohibited Books in 1559. Public opinion regarding credibility of the ruling princes in early modern times was key to maintaining public trust and continued governance and rule. Indeed, printed media became the key instrument to Martin Luther’s Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. It also provided the materialistic foundation for the rise of nationalism and the nation-state that became the paramount political institution of the modern world (see

Nationalism). These examples illustrate even early on, recognition of the influence and the power of the printed media. The secularization that followed, on the other hand, pushed the religious matters to the domain of the “private” from the public sphere.

The evolution of the concept of public opinion, however, is associated with the political economy of the early modern era. Alternately, the development of capitalism fostered the creation of financial markets necessitated by the growing expense to wage a war as well as the expansion of a bureaucracy that required the additional burden of pay roll for civil servants. In the sixteenth century, newspapers began to appear in European cities. These were later institutionalized as weekly, then daily papers in the seventeenth century. One of the main functions of the early newspapers was circulation of information for trade and commerce. “Public” at that time, referred mainly to prospective buyers of government securities, with the banking community making up the larger outside sphere. So while the printed media initially played a role in secularization of the medieval religious structure, it later expanded its sphere of influence into the realm of political economy.

The French Revolution marked the critical threshold when the notion of “public” extended to the masses beyond the confines of bourgeois society (see *Democracy*). Establishment of democratic regimes in the United States and Europe following the ideals of the Revolution were cast in an optimistic light in the public opinion discourse. Daily papers in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century became a model for a new form of communication that signified democracy at work. The notion of the public was differentiated from that of the masses on account of being a moral collective whose formation did printed media mediate, and the sovereignty of public opinion in a democracy was celebrated without any hesitation until the early twentieth century.

The massive social mobilization experience during total wars in the twentieth century (World War I and World War II) was a turning point in allowing even the most casual observers of public opinion to reflect critically on the potential role of mass media as an agent of propaganda rather than just as a mirror of public opinion, as was previously thought. One of the most widely read and a journalist wrote enduring texts on public opinion whose experience as an information officer during World War I opened up a new perspective (Lippmann, 1922). The concept of the pseudo-environment, coined by Lippmann, still remains in circulation in analyses of modern social milieu where construction of public opinion by the elite is facilitated by manipulation of symbols, including the use of stereotypes. Image control became a critical issue not only in the military arena through propaganda campaigns, in the economic front during marketing campaigns, but also in the political field during electoral campaigns.

In a representative democracy, public opinion plays a fundamental role in the outcome of national and local elections. It is critical for politicians to be able to appeal successfully to public opinion in their constituencies (see *Election and Voting*). Election campaigns are aimed at creating, reinforcing, and converting people’s attitudes and opinions with the ultimate goal being that of winning the vote, so a candidate must utilize every possible means of eliciting support. Just as commodities in a consumer-oriented society vie for consumers’ attention through marketing research and commercial campaigns, so do candidates in electoral campaigns. Therefore, it is by no coincidence that in modern times, a branch of study in the field of public opinion dealing exclusively with the refinement of

the opinion poll method has been developed, primarily as a scientific endeavor to predict election results and analyze its outcome. Problems with accurate measurement and interpretation of the results of public opinion polls continue to be a major concern.

3. Contemporary Public Opinion and Media Studies

The establishment of a public opinion sampling method, which the institution of G. Gallup, E. Roper and A. Crossley utilized to correctly predict the outcome of the 1936 presidential election in the United States fueled future media effect researches. Public Opinion and media studies are linked in several ways—not only is media an integral part in the formation of public opinion, modalities of influences with which media interact with how and what we think has been the site of intensive academic investigation.

3.1 Limited Effects model

The most influential study to appear in the 1940s was led by P. F. Lazarsfeld and others with a book titled *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign*. Ironically, contrary to its research objective, the authors found that mass media had minimal effect on the people's choice. What became known as the "limited effects" model of mass communication study was thus hypothesized in a rather coincidental fashion. E. Katz together with P. F. Lazarsfeld further developed the "two-step flow of communication" hypothesis in their study of personal influence, which was to become a key hypothesis in the limited effects school. To sum up major propositions offered in the limited effect model: (a) that the most likely effect of the mass media was to reinforce pre-existing views (political pre-disposition) among the audience rather than to alternate their views. Those who do not hold strong opinion are likely to be moved toward their demographic "predisposition"; (b) that media's persuasive campaigns are ineffective because of the audience propensity for "selective exposure" of the information; (c) that personal influence via social network predominates over media influence through a two-step flow of communication where opinion leaders mediate the flow of information from mass media and then translate and convey it to a relatively inactive general public.

This hypothesis came under scrutiny in the 1960s by critics who questioned the validity of the findings of the limited effects school. A significant social change in the mass media environment during that period was the proliferation and mass utilization of television (TV) and the emerging dominance of the TV-viewing experience throughout advanced industrialized society. Against this backdrop, another stream of media studies began to appear in the 1970s, re-examining the various ways mass media influences people.

3.2 Agenda-setting Function of Mass Media

M. E. McCombs and D. L. Shaw (1972) carried out field studies during the 1968 US presidential campaign in Chapel Hill, NC. They found a strong correlation between the issues that repeatedly appeared in mass media and the issues regarded as salient by the electoral. They formulated a model consisting of two variables: public (recipient of media information) acknowledgement of the salience of an issue as the dependent variable and exposure of issues in mass media as independent variables, and the causal relationship

between the two was implied. Their pioneering study in this field became known as “the agenda-setting function of mass media” hypothesis, and about two hundred empirical studies proliferated in the two decades following the formulation of the hypothesis.

Attempts were made to differentiate and identify specific effects of various media by adding several intervening variables. It became known that different forms of media influence audiences in different ways. For instance, newspapers may have an influence in the area of long-term issue priority whereas TV may affect the short-term saliency of an issue through what is called “spot lighting effect.” Inclusion of various intervening variables such as the characteristic of the audience (amount of mass media exposure, demographic factors, orientation needs of the audience, interaction frequency with other people, etc.) and the characteristic of the issue (degree of perceived relevancy to the audience, etc.) attained a certain degree of refinement for the model.

A broader implication of media effect, which encompasses broader arguments in sociology and political science under the rubric of, “construction of social reality” has found new focus. Early mass communication theory which is also known as the bullet theory of communication assumed that the media functions primarily as a conduit of information which is neutral in ideological nature—neither adding, subtracting, or distorting the original information—to the recipient, the public. Contrary to such early media studies based on “the hypodermic effect” hypothesis, recent studies focus attention on the power of mass media in the domain of social reality construction. Beyond agenda setting, mass media is known to function also in the realm of agenda building, image construction, and framing of the social reality. This implies that mass media may influence not only what we think about but also how we think about the social issues and more broadly and importantly, social reality in general. Some early public opinion studies shared similar concerns but saliency of the proposition was heightened as multiplicity of exposure to audio–visual media increased.

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Biographical Sketch

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