Communicating with citizens?
Representations of public opinion
in Polish public discourse

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ABSTRACT: While political scientists and communication scholars have long been interested in the relationship between democracy, media and public opinion, still too little attention has been focused on how these concepts and institutions are perceived by different actors functioning in the public sphere. This paper argues that the kind of idea of public opinion persists in society depends on the model of democracy adopted by various public actors, the historical context of the idea and the agendas measuring public opinion. Based on in-depth ($n = 32$) and focused group ($n = 36$) interviews this study shows that the way people look at different theoretical concepts depends not only on their different representations but also on the roles they play in the public sphere. Representations of public opinion expressed by lay people, politicians and journalists seem to be mutually exclusive. The paper explores the way Polish democracy persists despite these controversies.

KEYWORDS: public opinion, democracy, media, representations

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INTRODUCTION

The main problem of this article is the "public opinion" category, which is anchored firmly in contemporary political and media discourse, experts' and — last but not least — in common discourse. The popularity of this concept results from the key role it plays in democratic theory and practice. The idea of democracy ("rule of the people") requires "the people" to take part in political discussion and decision-making. For this reason "public opinion" is highly valued by actors playing in the public sphere — politicians, journalists, intellectuals and lay people.

Simultaneously this concept is contingent on a number of factors including social mood, communication environment and the way this entity is framed in the minds of different citizens. The central argument here is that images of public opinion are combined with the publics' visions of democracy, media, the public sphere and the role politicians, journalists and lay people should play in the social and

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political system. Therefore this study is aimed at answering two primary questions: (1) How do various public actors conceptualize public opinion? and (2) How do they perceive the policymaking process and the role public opinion plays in it?

Reviewing the vast literature on the role of public opinion in the public sphere, we can find a growing body of research on how public actors define "public opinion" in the United States (Herbst, 2002, 1998, 1993b; Kohut, 1998; Powlick, 1995). Similar in nature, "pictures of public opinion" in the heads of governmental-system actors and in media discourse, were also collected in Germany by Dieter Fuchs and Barbara Pfetsch (1996), Christiane Eilders, Neidhardt Friedhelm and Barbara Pfetsch (2004). Besides, there are many other important studies concerning polls and their importance in the contemporary "mediated democratic system" (Ginsberg 1986, 1989; Herbst, 1993a; Converse, 1996; Manza, Cook, 2002). Along this trend Justin Lewis, presented an interesting analysis of the significance of opinion polls considering polls as a significant form of "representation" in contemporary culture (2001).

In this article I would like to pose questions regarding Polish reality: what is the meaning and importance of "public opinion" in Polish public life? Is it only a phrase of little worthwhile application or is it central to public life, its essential element? These are the questions this article is intending to address while considering the problem of the sense of "public opinion" in democracy from politicians, journalists and lay people's perspective.

Despite numerous controversies on the position public opinion occupies in the process of wielding power in democratic states, and ongoing debates on the meaning of public opinion in different disciplines, questions on the shape of images of public opinion, representations that persist in minds of politicians, journalists and citizens remain understudied. They are crucial for political life, because they show us how the feedback loop between government and the electorate works, and how parliamentary officials are held accountable to their constituents. The significance of a journalist's visions of public opinion lies in the fact that journalism is fundamentally about speech — the flow of conversation that is made between different actors playing in the public sphere. In this sense journalists are the gatekeepers of media debates. Their representations tell us who are the actors admitted to those debates and what is communication for. We will get the answer what positions are occupied in media debates by columnists, state officials and the people. And finally citizens' conceptualizations of public opinion are of great importance because they enable the people to define their roles in the political realm.

How are these representations formed? They result from various roles we anticipate people might play in the political system. These are in turn results of different models of democracy we consciously or unconsciously adapt when thinking about public opinion. Therefore we learn the assumption put forward by Herbst that the way we comprehend public opinion "is rooted in and derived from our choice of ideal-typical democratic model" (1998, p. 16). This means that different models

of democracy carry different normative expectations on politicians, journalists and citizens. In order to clarify representations of public opinion in the public sphere it is necessary to specify which model of democracy is involved when making connections between public opinion, the political decision-making process and the media.

MODELS OF DEMOCRACY AND PUBLIC OPINION

There is no "one democracy". As Robert A. Dahl puts it in *Democracy and Its Critics* there is a mixture of theories and practices that are often deeply inconsistent (1989, p. 2). Therefore instead of saying "there is democracy" we talk about a plethora of variants of democracy that are built "to exhibit and explain the real relations, underlying the appearances, between or within the phenomena under study […] to explain the probability or possibility of future changes […] with a concern for what is desirable or good or right" (Macpherson, 1977, p. 2–4). Over the last three decades there is a consensus in a growing number of articles and books over different types of democracy (cf. Macpherson, 1977; Dahrendorf, 1980; Pateman, 1985; Held, 1996; Manin, 1997). Various models differ in the main elements of a democratic form and their underlying structure of relations. The most discussed models of democracy are: (1) liberal, (2) elitist and (3) participatory/deliberative.

Obviously they differ in some ways, firstly in framing politics and the way common will emerges. Although all models emphasize the importance of citizens in politics, they address to them different expectations including respecting democratic procedures, having a basic knowledge of the decision-making processes or ability for a considerable engagement in public affairs. Simultaneously they agree that the most basic role of citizens is to hold leaders accountable for what they have done or intend to do. They also differ considering the public sphere — it is a space free from the whims of the marketplace, fostering collective self-determination or free from the demands of the state being the catalyst of individual self-determination. These models of democracy also entail some implications for media and journalism: they at least provide some basic information about how society and political processes work or foster public discussions characterized by equality, rationality and objectivity.

What is most important, is that liberal, elitist and participatory models of democracy differ in their assumptions about the nature and the role of public opinion in a democratic state. All of them admit that the people's own voice about its preferences and beliefs should play some role in organizing and/or supervising the governmental processes. On the other hand some legislators, politicians and scholars consider the problem of responsiveness of public officials to inattentive, passive and uninformed public opinion. If there is a problem of public's low level of political knowledge, this diminishes the quality of political decisions and in turn undercuts democracy. Irrationality of public opinion makes real the threat of "mob rule", and means political decisions that are based on shallow, indecisive and illogical premises. At best — in this elitist vision — public opinion mirrors projections of what

journalists, politicians and other "elites" believe, at worst it reflects citizens' ignorant opinions. A more optimistic version of competitive elitism is when we admit that even though ordinary citizens are badly informed and incompetent, they may still influence governmental officials and political representatives by interest group pressure who actually represent not only their own but also opinions of the public (Blumer, 1948; Davidson & Oleszek, 1998). In the liberal model, public opinion is a product of aggregation of many individual opinions or opinions and beliefs of the majority of citizens. Therefore public opinion polls turns out to be good indicators of what people want from government and their results are frequently stable, coherently organized, taking into account the best available information and reasonable (Converse, 1990; Page & Shapiro, 1992). According to the third model, public opinion may be understood as being formed by rational deliberation over the issues of general interest. The public sphere provides this kind of ideal situation in which public opinion is shaped by rational deliberation of the public good and democracy is driven by public opinion (Habermas, 1993).

Table 1. Comparing models of democracy

	Liberal	Elitist	Participatory/ Deliberative
Politics	Game played by the people's political representatives	Spectacle organized by competing elites	Discourse and activity carried out by the people
Government	Established through free and fair election	Established through competitive election	Self-government
The Consent — Common Will	Emerges through the competition of ideas in the free marketplace	Emerges through the debate between elites	Emerges through reasoning and debating of the public
Political activity of citizens	Weak if any	None except from voting	Considerable
Concept of man	Self-centered, focused on individual self-determination, respects democratic procedures, able to monitor "marketplace of ideas", reacts when needed	Irrational, apathetic, unable to self-govern, able to choose between candidates, party platforms and promises	Politically interested and active, rational, tolerant, able for deliberation, having knowledge about the public sphere, striving for consensus
Public Opinion	Aggregation of individual opinions based on individual activity and unhampered exchange of ideas	Aggregation of individual opinions based on the press and politician's efforts of shaping it	Consequence of public deliberation
Media function	Provider of information that enables communication between individuals, public opinion and the government	Watchdog that informs public opinion of elites activity	Communication platform that protects the conditions for public discourse

Source: author.

RESEARCHING REPRESENTATIONS OF PUBLIC OPINION

Public opinion in this article is understood as a concept whose meaning reflects working models of democracy that circulate in public discourse, intersect and crystallize continuously through conversations, words, gestures, everyday meetings and the media.

In order to examine representations of public opinions which are routinely expressed by different members of the public in their discourse with others, individual in-depth interviews were conducted.[1] Two classes of rather busy and tough respondents were questioned: Polish parliamentary deputies (*n* = 15) and top journalists of leading Polish newspapers (*n* = 17) discussing the political domain. Polish MP's cover a wide political and ideological spectrum, from the far left (Democratic Left Alliance — SLD; Self-Defence), centrists and moderates (Civic Platform — PO) to libertarians, right conservatives, and Christian activists (Law and Justice — PiS; League of Polish Families — LPR). The sample of Polish journalists consists of editor-in-chiefs and columnists of the three opinion-forming newspapers *Dziennik* (DZ), *Rzeczpospolita* (RP) and *Gazeta Wyborcza* (GW), representing the more conservative (GW and DZ) or libertarian wing (GW) of the daily press. Moreover interviews were conducted with weekly magazine journalists, radio and television editors. It turned out that the size of the population had resulted in "theoretical saturation" of the data. This simply means that (within the limits of available time and money) "the researcher finds that no new data is being unearthed" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; p. 292).

Focused groups were chosen for researching lay people's representations of public opinion.[2] Group interviews are often more appropriate for studying the phenomenon of social representations (Farr, 1993; Livingstone & Lunt, 1996) when it is possible to draw together different publics. Four focus groups (*n* = 38) were held with different types of "lay members" of society. The first group comprised farmers from small eastern Poland village. The second was held in Zamość (a city in the eastern/central part of Poland with a population of 66,000), and comprised members of the Polish working class. Focused interviews with the last two groups were held in Lublin and were made up of students and members of the better-educated public, working bureaucracy and freelance jobs.

The diversity of informants was important for this study since the goal was to collect and understand as many representations as possible. Since the sample is purpo-

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[1] Interviews lasted from 25 minutes to 120 minutes (depending on respondents) but most took about 40 minutes. All of them were conducted by the author during January to July of 2007. Tape-recorded discourses were later transcribed.

[2] FGI sessions were conducted with "lay people" who represented divergent backgrounds. Each session lasted from 90 to 120 minutes. All of them were conducted by the author during April to July of 2007. Participants were free in expressing their opinions, and the flow of conversation was smooth. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed.

sive and not random, it is impossible to generalize information for the whole population. But that was not the case. The aim was to make typifications on how different respondents "grasp" public opinion.

Interviews with Parliamentary Deputies were conducted either in MP's offices or in the Polish Parliament; with journalists in their homes, restaurants or offices, and with lay people in Focus Group Studios. The average in-depth interview lasted approximately 45 minutes, although a few were longer or shorter. Although the same protocol was used for each interview, informants were encouraged to speak freely about any aspect of the topic at hand. In some interviews, respondents spoke extensively in answer to the first questions, so subsequent questions were eliminated or modified because they were irrelevant or redundant. Among other things informants were asked about: (1) how they defined and thought about "public opinion"; (2) who is "public opinion"; (3) what did they think about public opinion polls, (4) how they understood the role "public opinion" plays in the democratic system, and (5) what is the relationship between media, public opinion and government and politicians.

RESULTS

The central question directed to different participants of the public sphere was, "What does the phrase "public opinion" mean for you?" By putting this kind of general question I usually did not get any specific answer. It was too abstract and intangible for informants to give details on the phenomenon of "public opinion". Therefore the additional question "What is this phrase related with?" was helpful to "immerse" into the world of politics and media where public opinion is one of the important components.

POLITICS AND PUBLIC OPINION

The general attitude and readiness for building sophisticated concepts of public opinion depends on the informant's social category/group affiliation. When analyzing lay people's representation of public opinion, it seems that those less educated[3], representing farmers and physical workers, admit to simpler theories than others. They define public opinion as "we" or society.

> RS: "We" means who?
> L[abour]M[an]1: Public opinion. Yes — we altogether.
> LM3: Society.
> LM4: Yes. Society.
> LW[oman]2: Society in its entirety.

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[3] The level of formal education was measured by asking informants about the last grade or class that they completed in school.

Similarly farmers say:

> F[armer]M[an]3: Public opinion? Perhaps it is the whole nation, isn't it?
> FW1: Yes. We are!
> [laughs] …
> FM11: Those who are interested, and in our society usually everybody is. I mean everybody is more or less interested in. Rather everybody.

This is the simplest but also the most accessible and acceptable representation of public opinion for the people. At the same time it is limited to individuals themselves, limited by time and space to the here and now. When talking about public opinion though, we should consider all of them, their opinions, beliefs and values.

No informant in the above mentioned two focused groups spontaneously provided any other theoretical association. However, students and bureaucrats provide more refined "theorizing". Their considerations take into account the abstract notion of the term, its usefulness or uselessness and the problem of representativeness of public opinion.

> B[ureaucrat]W[oman]2: [Public opinion — RS] perhaps it means the opinion of every citizen….
> BM3: It's not though. Because someone says "public opinion considers something", and I listen to it and simply know that me and my circle of friends do not think like that.
> BW3: Exactly! And where is this opinion from?
> BM3: So quoting public opinion is a kind of manipulation, because they can say everything, that public opinion considers this or that.
> [noise]
> BM3: And someone listens and says: oh sugar! — they think like that!
> BW2: Yes. But it probably depends on where this research was done. Doesn't it?
> BM4: Ten people.
> BW2: What percent? Exactly!
> BW1: But these surveys should have been somehow representative if they quote them.
> BW3: They quote…
> [voices of impatience and having doubts about representativeness]

Not being researchers, laymen tried to establish a hare-brained definition of the sample that might represent "public opinion". It is therefore still the reference point for informants, the concept of society and its "representatives" who express their beliefs and opinions in the name of the whole public, nation or society.

When asked about the best way to measure public opinion, informants pointed primarily, though unwillingly, at public opinion polls. Simultaneously they expressed numerous reservations about them.

> LM4: [The polls — RS] are not reliable…
> LM3: No, they aren't.
> LM4: Phone polls are done let's say, on 100 or more people randomly selected, aren't they? Everything depends on who, for example, commissioned them. Which party commissions polls…

Lay people try to understand the logic of opinion polls appealing to their own intuition. Therefore, shortcomings enlisted by them are often missed. Not being grounded on their experience or ideas of how the sample is taken and analyzed, they have built the image of something that is "out of reach, out of sight" and gradually form themselves "a trustworthy picture inside their heads of the world beyond their reach" (Lippmann, 1997, p. 18). This is a natural process when someone suffers a knowledge deficit. And it has turned out that knowledge of polling methodology within informants was weak at best. Thus, results are similar to those attained by the American Council for Marketing and Opinion Research, where the majority of the public did not understand how a randomly selected sample of 1500–2000 people could reflect the opinion of the US population (O'Neil, 1996).

This distrust toward polls characterizes not only lay people but also politicians and journalists. However, when lay people make a connection between public opinion with the "people" themselves, politicians link public opinion with the aggregate of individual opinions picked in nationally representative polls and opinions expressed by the electorate. Therefore, for politicians to speak about public opinion means to speak about polls' reports and opinions of the electorate.

> MP1: You know… There is no collective being like public opinion. This is the result of many particular opinions… Here is the question for example, what do polls measure… The polls certainly measure something… There is something like the public mood…
> MP14: We can say public opinion… as general public opinion… And certainly the general reflection of public opinion attitude are results of the polls on political preferences. It is obvious.

Bearing in mind politicians' objections to polls, they stress the importance of direct meetings with "the people" equated with "electorate".

> MP3: [Public opinion — RS] is a kind of "social hearing". This means, you know, meeting with the electorate, with the people, kind of understanding, to know what's what… It is hard to define, because, you know, it can be sometimes an opinion heard at an official meeting and sometimes being at a name day party…

Journalists' representations of public opinion differ substantially from those provided by lay people and politicians. For them public opinion is a meaningless concept, a catchphrase of little value, something used and abused by columnists and politicians. When asking informants about the image of public opinion, they usually mention media audience, passive listeners or viewers influenced by the media and politicians. Much more rarely do they refer to the people, society or public opinion polls.

> J4: But I don't use the term public opinion at all! I don't like terms like this, [because — RS] what do they mean? It seems to me, that usually this is a rhetorical figure, because people are heterogeneous and they expect different things… so I am not able to give you an answer [what public opinion means — RS], because I do not use this phrase…

J2: Public opinion is a segment of media consumers… Television is watched everyday by dozens of millions of Polish people. Therefore there is a consumer's market comprising lots of Poles, but we cannot say this is public opinion. Public opinion is a small part of this market, which consciously participates in it… Needless to say that the majority of these consumers are passive…

What is the role public opinion plays in politics, and especially in the political decision-making process? It is supposed in a democracy that public opinion influences decisions made by their parliamentary representatives. According to the participatory model of democracy, individuals comply with the rational-activist model of the citizenry. They are involved, informed, rational and active in building enlightened views about the issues and policy positions of the candidates. The elitists model considerably reduces the political demands placed on citizens: they are to be able to select from among different political platforms, and in the liberal model of democracy, "the people" govern through their delegates, who — once elected — must care for and anticipate voter preferences in advance of the next election (Erikson & Tedin 2007; p. 18–21).

Lay people's vision in this respect is clear and manifested unanimously by all "lay informants". Affirmative answers for the question about "public officials and MP's responsiveness to public opinion" varied only in the range and scope of the decision's context.

FW2: MP's should listen raptly to the voice of public opinion
FM5: Of course.
[voices of support]
FM5: They are delegates, after all!
FM3 : But they're chosen by the people!
FM11: The voice of public opinion should be the most important 'cause it is…
FW2: We have elected them, we decided them to…
FW1: …govern the country. And it should be like what we want, not them.

When lay people refer to politics they mean the pursuit of power or partisan advantage. The purpose of political competition — according to informants — is to seek office which is an end in itself. To achieve it they are to use any means to defeat their rivals and bring them to power. Therein politics is a kind of game, an often unfair one, in which cunning, shrewdness and resourcefulness are rewarded, in which all sorts of tricks are permissible and rules are changed by the players to suit themselves. The main actors of this game are competing elites playing with the nation and the country.

S[tudent]M[ale]1: When politicians are not able to reach their political goals with the use of truth, then… they lie.
SM2: Truthfulness is not a virtue during campaigns. Nowadays politicians do not say anything that would be internally motivated. Instead they have a team of advisors, pundits, social engineers etc., who have the knowledge and methods intended to… yyy… to produce an effect. Therefore it is not a lie. It is application of a kind of technique, a social mechanism…

Politics is a spectacle for informants. As witnessed by parts of the public, it evokes their emotional reactions, building an unintelligible world which is partly as it really is, but mostly as they imagine it to be. Some of the members of the public see just sporting competition, political rivalry, and others, a sham competition-like show. Regardless, as Edelman has pointed out (1985), we must not forget that politics as a 'spectacular' requires a stage on which to be performed. This means media, and — in consequence — the mediatization of politics. This causes — as some say — the deprecation of politics and disappointment of the public. Informants see this "facade politics" in which political elites determine real policy behind democratic institutions and in front of television cameras. So, they have already grown jaded. As one factory worker in his 40s, said: "I know they are pursuing their aims. And I know when the others come to power, they will do the same. They dig up some dirt [on their political enemies — RS]. The point is to distract people's attention from real problems. To give the people circuses, isn't it like that?" (LM4).

Here we have a discrepancy between people's expectations and political actions. Politics for people is about how to solve public problems, about a politician's response to demands expressed by public opinion while for politicians it is about winning elections and votes. For politicians, politics is only an instrument for making gains and winning power, it is about pursuing parties' ideals which coincide with people ones. That's why citizens' participation in politics is not expected.

In the majority, politicians express belief that public opinion is too ignorant, irrational and prone to persuasion to rule itself. Ruling by representatives is the best way for democracy to operate, because it demands from its citizens enlightened understanding and effective participation (Dahl, 1989; p. 37–38). Even if informants are optimistic about public opinion's abilities to make reasonable decisions when it comes to the most publicized elections, they are less so when it comes to other decisions. These kinds of reservations are expressed by Russell J. Dalton. "In such second- and third-order elections, the means of information that voters can use in first-order elections may be insufficient or even altogether lacking. So the expansion of the electoral marketplace may empower the public in a sense, but in another sense may make it hard for voters to exercise meaningful political judgment" (Dalton, 2004, p. 132).

For journalists, public opinion does not exist. There exist only media consumers, who consist of citizens who are rather uninformed, disengaged, volatile and changeable. At the same time, journalists are convinced they have knowledge about or a sense of the public sentiment that emerge from their day-to-day conversations with the media audience. Therefore politicians shouldn't follow public opinion and should rather stick to their political platforms. One of the most experienced journalists, said:

J4: I think referendums shouldn't be used in general and they shouldn't be a substitute for parliamentary democracy. It is improper to appeal to the public's knowledge while they do not or cannot have it.

MEDIA AND PUBLIC OPINION

It would be improper not to bear in mind the media's role in the formation of representations of public opinion in public discourse. It is claimed that the media contributes to political cynicism, civic malaise, framing politics, molding of public opinion and influencing political parties to adapt the media logic in order to gain visibility and electoral success and damaging the public sphere by establishing entertainment-driven and celebrity-oriented space.

A general and total critique of the media is commonplace within scientific discourse. Some scholars are convinced that the media hinders effective communication, unduly influencing the public. Others describing the role the media plays in democracy, point at a positive metaphor of a "marketplace of ideas". Bringing three basic functions of communication for societies: surveillance (the media acts as a watchdog), transmission (the media facilitates idea exchange and debate) and correlation (the media acts as the voice of the people), the last one would be here the most important (Lasswell, 1948; Curran, 2000). But according to Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky the reality is quite the opposite. The media is not the "marketplace of ideas" but rather "a marketplace of commerce" not interested in examining problems and issues. "The audience "interaction" facilitated by advancing interactive capabilities mainly help audience members to shop, but they also allow media firms to collect detailed information on their audiences, and thus to fine-tune program features and ads to individual characteristics as well as to sell by a click during programs. Along with reducing privacy, this should intensify commercialization" (1988, p. xvii).

This approach devolves into a theory in which public opinion is seen to be fed and manipulated by the media. Do informants share this perspective?

For lay people, journalists together with politicians are at quarters. Paradoxically at the same time, they cooperate simply because it is in their best economic interest. Simultaneously both try to influence the public which is not sovereign: the owners, politicians and ads officers decide what is to be offered, and the only thing the public can do is to choose among options.

> SW1: Nowadays, the media is said to be called the fourth estate, but I think it is actually the first. This is because the media can influence not only public opinion but political behavior as well. It depends on who works in the media. But actually media content does not depend on particular journalists but upon the owners. Owners decide upon what will be published…
> …
> FM4: I think politicians fly at their throats only when they appear in the television.
> FM3: Of course…

[informants nod in assent]
FM4: It is for purpose, that apparently they do not agree…
FM3: These are workmates… And the media shows it…

The media is seen by informants as not quite the independent agent acting in the public sphere but rather as the arm of a force of ruling elites. Informants realize they are in turn considered as passive consumers of media content. Yet they still stay inactive, due to a sense of helplessness.

For politicians, media and journalists fulfill two key functions: they are a source of information and the means of publicity and control. The media not only elaborates on issues but firstly brings them to attention. Journalists are gatekeepers when politicians try to gain public attention. But they can also be used as a pillory locating the issue in the agenda. They decide and select "what the public must attend to … what is urgent, which questions must be concerned with" and which behavior is "stigmatized or condoned" (Noelle-Neumann, 1984, p. 154–158).

> MP2: The media is sometimes the source of important information for politicians. This way, journalists can even influence them. But there is another leverage of journalists on politicians. I mean pillorying them: sometimes crudely, by extortion, by digging up some — this happens. And I must admit, many politicians surrender to this pillory.

According to politicians, public opinion is susceptible to persuasion, dependent on the media in a sense of providing the public with information and entertaining it.

> MP12: The mass media has enormous power today. Of course there is a direct and powerful feedback between the media and public opinion. Both public opinion and the media are linked together. But to a large extent, I guess, the media influences public opinion — not the other way round.

The media focuses on sensationalized stories and produces a "feeding frenzy" (Sabato, 1991) at the same time activating cynicism about politics, government and public policy. This way, instead of improving citizens' knowledge, the media distracts them from what is important. As William A. Hatchen complains, "public affairs journalism, in particular, has been trivialized and corrupted by a mélange of entertainment, sensationalism, celebrity-watching, and merchandising driven by advertising, PR, and corporate profits" (Hatchen, 1998).

> MP15: The media's field of interest is limited. It is not interested in legislation processes but only in those elements which may evoke social emotions, which are attractive. Media and journalists do not care about the relevance of the issue, the significance of the legislation. There might be proceeded legislation that is fundamental to the state with "zero interest" of journalists, because they don't recognize it as contributing to the increase of the size of the edition of their newspaper. Therefore, there are no journalists in the gallery and nobody interests in the legislation process in spite of the fact that this regulation is crucial for the state.

In this context it is understandable that journalist informants do not see the media as a debating forum that facilitates informed deliberation about the major

issues and this way, mediating between citizens and the state. Citizens are primarily consumers, not participants of public debate. As a 40-year-old news editor said:

> The people need debates. But where is the difference between the debate held by journalists and those organized by politicians or pundits. It is more clear, coherent. This means that journalists are taught how to provide intelligible information in a clear way about something provided by politicians and experts in a roundabout way.

Journalists in this study are self-sufficient and frugal at the same time: they organize debates between themselves, avoiding the necessity of translation of what is intricate, into information that is simple and accessible.

CONCLUSIONS: THE POLITICAL REALITY OF REPRESENTATIONS

Reconstruction of representations of public opinion in public discourse allows us to better understand the world in which public opinion, politics and mass media of communications interpenetrate.

In this study the axis of different meanings of public opinion begins in three normative theories of democracy and their demands upon citizens, journalists and politicians. It was assumed that informants' representations revealed in public discourse allow us to discover their unconsciously acknowledged "working models of democracy" and the degree to which these representations are in keeping with these models.

Even if groups interviewed do not allow us to generalize research outcomes to whole populations, they let us build commonsensical representations of the social and political reality of democratic countries. Anyway, it turned out that quite quickly informers did not provide new categories or their properties. Therefore while attaining similar instances over and over again, I became empirically confident that categories analyzed were saturated (Strauss, Corbin, 1998). Results achieved increased our understanding of how actors playing in the public sphere — politicians, journalists and lay people perceive each other and why.

For lay people, politics and governing is about building a political spectacle performed in order to gain power. Although the electorate realizes that this is some kind of game, they do not feel absolved of emotional engagement in this rivalry. Politicians share with them this feeling but this does not prevent them from performing the roles they were ascribed to. At the same time politicians are convinced that they "keep a hand on the pulse of public opinion" by public meetings and polls. Journalists are disappointed observers of this game carried on between political elites and citizens. Instead of public opinion they prefer to talk about media consumers and different audiences. They listen to them, read their letters, talk with them and "a conversation with a taxi driver" epitomizes an opinion of an average citizen. They do not trust polls that at best can show how ill-informed, uninter-

ested and stupefied is public opinion. Consequently the general public is very unlikely to articulate rational opinions or demands and evaluate their political representatives with respect to public policy. Journalists are to represent citizens in a sense that "they are capable of placing questions or to undertake a problem that the public is unable to cope with, if only because they do not have access to it" (J4).

How do these commonsensical representations held by citizens, politicians and journalists match up with different democratic theories? When trying to determine group representations to previously determined normative models of democracy, all of them seem to fit to different categories: politicians to the liberal model of democracy, journalists to the elitist one and average citizens fit the participatory model. While the liberal and elitist models are close together in dismissing public opinion or citizens from their duties toward the state, the participatory model results in considerable expectations with reference to public opinion. But lay informants even if unengaged, disinterested, with affective thinking, were not willing to renounce their right to have a right for participation in the decision-making process.

Here the results of this study coincide with those done by Susan Herbst (1998). In her research of different meanings of public opinion in groups of staffers, journalists and citizen activists, it turned out that social position determines the perspective they choose. Occupation was a "window that people look out of at the political landscape" so "It makes no sense to ask what individuals think of politics unless we know where they stand" (162). Different views of public opinion, she revealed, were not only discordant but they conflict each other.

Similarly, informants in this study presented opposing representations of public opinion. But despite fundamental differences between mutual expectations and real-life activities of different segments of Polish society, democracy has not been engendered throughout the last 20 years. There has become apparent a shared belief that democracy is the aim of itself. Even if its components do not comply with systemic premises, the system has endured, since some elements may always be improved.

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