Workshop/Media Group

Communication Theory

A Journal of the International Communication Association

Edited by Robert T. Craig
University of Colorado at Boulder

COMMUNICATION THEORY is an international, interdisciplinary forum for theory and theoretically oriented research on all aspects of communication. It is designed to sustain a scholarly dialogue across disciplinary, methodological, and geographical boundaries. Holding up a mirror to the field of communication in all its diversity, stimulating reflection and dialogue on issues of interdisciplinary significance, encouraging innovations and experimentation, and at times provoking controversy, COMMUNICATION THEORY will engage its readers in the reconstruction of an academic discipline at a crucial juncture in its history.

ARTICLES OF INTEREST: •An Action Assembly Perspective on Social Skill, *John O'Greene* and *Deanna Geddes* •Visual Literacy: A Theoretical Synthesis, *Paul Messaris* •Dueling Structures: The Theory of Resistance in Discourse, *Michael Huspek* •Lists and Stories as Organizational Communication, *Larry Davis Browning* •The Ecology of Games Shaping Telecommunications Policy, *William H. Dutton*

Sample copies available!

SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION
ISSN 1050-3293, Volume 3, 1993 (4 issues)
Individuals: $30.00
Institutions: $65.00,
Outside U.S., add $17.50 (airmail included)

All orders from Europe, Africa, and the Middle East (except Israel) must be placed with Guilford Press, c/o The Distribution Centre, Blackhorse Road, Letchworth, Herts SG6 1HN, UNITED KINGDOM. All other orders should be placed directly with Guilford's Journals Department in New York.

GUILFORD PUBLICATIONS, INC.
72 Spring Street, New York, NY 10012, Attn: Journals Dept.

Call Toll-Free 1-800-365-7006, 9 AM to 5 PM EST
(In Area Codes 212, 718, 516 & 914, call 212-431-9800),
FAX 212-966-6708

The meaning of public opinion: citizens' constructions of political reality

Susan Herbst

DEPARTMENTS OF COMMUNICATION STUDIES AND POLITICAL SCIENCE, NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY, ILLINOIS

Communication theorists have long been interested in the relationship between mass media and public opinion formation. To list the large number of studies in this area would take considerable effort, since scholars from a variety of nations have probed the impact of media on political preferences. Yet very little attention has been focused on the ways that citizens *themselves* theorize about the role of media in public opinion processes. This paper explores how a group of Americans — some active in politics and some not — conceptualize the nature of links between the press, the state and the public.

Over the last decade, a growing number of communication researchers have engaged in the interpretive study of television audiences (e.g. Morley, 1980; Liebes and Katz, 1990; Hobson, 1991; Seiter et al., 1991). This research has been enlightening, since it reveals peoples' thoughts about fictional and news narratives, and about the roles media play in their lives (e.g. Jensen, 1990). One reason why these interpretive studies have been so influential is that they uncover what psychologists call 'lay theorics': different types of informants help researchers understand the meaning of programmes as well as their possible effects. In the present study I employ similar interpretive approaches, in order to gain insight into the complex association between media and public sentiment.

This is not an analysis of the relationship between audience and text. It is an enquiry into the ways individuals view patterns of opinion formation and change in America, and the relationship of media to these patterns. A primary focus of the study is citizens' definitions of the elusive phenomenon scholars have labelled 'public opinion'. Although there is a lively

Media, Culture and Society (SAGE, London, Newbury Park and New Delhi), Vol. 15 (1993), 437–454

debate over the meaning of public opinion in communications, political science, sociology and other disciplines, one set of questions about its meaning has remained virtually unasked: how do citizens characterize public opinion processes? Which definitions of public opinion do people choose when they conceptualize their own roles in the communication of political ideas? Academics search for definitions because they need to theorize about phenomena in a rigorous fashion, but citizens also need definitions in order to make sense of the political realm.

This paper is divided into five sections. In the first part, I briefly review the variety of ways theorists have conceptualized public opinion and public opinion processes. Next, I discuss the numerous theoretical frameworks relevant to the study of lay theories of politics — theories from social psychology, anthropology, sociology, communications and other disciplines. In the third section, I describe my methodological approach, choice of respondents, and the advantages and disadvantages associated with this type of interpretive endeavour. The last two sections are devoted to a discussion of results, conclusions, and implications for future research and theorizing about media and public opinion.

Scholarly debate about public opinion

In academic discourses about politics, one of the most widely used yet least understood constructs is 'public opinion'. Survey researchers have developed increasingly sophisticated tools to measure it (Converse, 1987), theorists have reconceptualized it (Blumer, 1948; Key, 1964; Noelle-Neumann, 1984), and journalists have both questioned its meaning and worried about its malleable nature (Lippmann, 1965; Sussman, 1988). Yet despite the continuing use of the phrase, the meaning of public opinion remains a mystery to the very researchers who use the concept to theorize about public sentiment.

In an unsuccessful attempt to find consensus about the meaning of public opinion among scholars, Childs (1965) located scores of very different definitions in the academic literature. In fact, a visit to the American government section of any university library reference room provides ample evidence that no shared definition of public opinion exists. Some writers argue that public opinion is the 'general will' of a political community or the opinions assigned to an ignorant public by the media (Shafritz, 1988: 455), while others believe it to be the beliefs of different publics (Plano and Greenberg, 1982: 142), the majority opinion (Garrison quoted in Sperber and Trittschuh, 1962: 343), or the result of elections, referenda and polls (Smith and Zurcher, 1968: 305). At this point, scholars are still far from agreement on the nature of public opinion (Winkler, 1984). In general, researchers and theorists tend to choose different

definitions because they focus on different types and dimensions of public communication.

Habermas (1974) has argued that definitions of public opinion change over time, with transformations in social, political and economic circumstance. As I have argued elsewhere, though (Herbst, 1993), it is still possible to sort the various meanings of public opinion into four definitional categories: aggregation, majoritarian, discursive/consensual, and reification. These categories are not mutually exclusive, but enable us to make some sense out of the enormous number of definitions across disciplines.

The most commonly found definitions of public opinion rest on the aggregation principle. Polls, surveys, elections and referenda — all means of expressing and assessing public opinion — assume that the public is an atomized mass of individuals, each with a set of opinions. Many researchers and theorists, as well as journalists and opinion pollsters, believe that public opinion is the sum of these opinions. Examples of this sort of thinking can be found in a variety of recent books and articles about public opinion. In their comprehensive account of American opinions, Page and Shapiro (1992: 30) wrote:

> We see survey research as a remarkably effective research tool, particularly in recent years when practitioners have been able to take advantage of long experience. Carefully worked out sampling schemes permit confident inferences about the opinions of millions of Americans, based on interviews with a few hundreds of them. Modern instrument design and interviewing techniques, combining art and science, elicit meaningful responses. Aggregate results of the sort we are concerned with (percentages of respondents giving particular answers) tend to average out individual-level errors and fluctuations.

Most social scientists working in the field of public opinion share Page and Shapiro's confidence in the aggregation-oriented approach.

Others see public opinion as majority opinion. In democracies, where majorities rule, the opinions that *matter* are those associated with the greatest number of people. Majoritarian definitions, like aggregation-oriented ones, depend upon adding up individual opinions. Yet some opinions are thought to be more important than others. An example from A. Lawrence Lowell's pioneering work illustrates the majoritarian approach to public opinion:

> A majority is not enough, and unanimity is not required, but the opinion must be such that while the minority may not share it, they feel bound, by conviction, not by fear, to accept it. (Cited in Childs, 1965: 17)

Another category of definitions is rooted in communication. These definitions, which I have labelled 'discursive/consensual', are based on the notion that public opinion evolves through public discourse. Unlike

aggregation approaches which assume opinion to be somewhat static (static enough to be measured with some certainty), theorists in this third category believe that opinions fluctuate as often as individuals talk to each other. Habermas (1989), for example, has argued that public opinion arises in the course of rational/critical discussion in the public sphere. Other theorists, coming to the problem of public opinion from different paradigms, have also argued that public opinion emerges as people engage in social comparison and conversation (e.g. Locke, 1894; Rousseau, 1950; Noelle-Neumann, 1984).

The last category of theorists believe that public opinion does not exist at all — that it is a reification or fictional entity. Walter Lippmann, for example, argued that public opinion was simply a projection of what journalists and political elites believed to be true (Lippmann, 1925, 1965). Theorists in this fourth category are critical of the ways that survey researchers, pollsters and journalists *create* public opinion through their measures and their writings: public opinion is, most often, a rhetorical tool used by the powerful to achieve their goals (see Bourdieu, 1979; Herbst, 1992).

Although this summary of definitions is a superficial one, it does outline the variety of meanings people have ascribed to 'public opinion' (for a thorough review, see Palmer, 1964). Before we turn to citizens' insights about public opinion, however, I must review the ways in which contemporary researchers have explored lay theories.

Lay theory and political beliefs

Many researchers interested in micro-level and collective behaviour have used in-depth, interpretive approaches to study citizens' political beliefs (e.g. Andersen, 1988; Crigler et al., 1990; Frank and Rivard, 1986; Graber, 1984; Lamb, 1974; Lane, 1962; Sanders, 1989; Wellman, 1977). Although these authors employed different theoretical frameworks in their work, much of this research was driven by an interest in the 'theories' citizens use to understand politics.

The study of 'lay' (or 'implicit') theory in psychology began with Heider (1958). Heider argued that the study of interpersonal relations would be informed by the rigorous analysis of what he called 'common-sense psychology'. The study of common sense, Heider believed, gives us insights into why people behave as they do, but may also help social scientists refine their own, 'scientific' theories about human behaviour. Heider (1958: 5) explained:

> Since common-sense psychology guides our behaviour toward other people, it is an essential part of the phenomena in which we are interested. In everyday life we form ideas about other people and about social situations. We interpret other people's actions and we predict what they will do under certain circumstances. Though these ideas are usually not formulated, they often function adequately. They achieve in some measure what a science is supposed to achieve: an adequate description of the subject matter which makes prediction possible . . . If a person believes that the lines in his palm foretell his future, this belief must be taken into account in explaining certain of his expectations and actions.

Although few psychologists actually used Heider's writings as guides for experimentation, his ideas became the basis for other, more rigorous research programmes on attribution in social psychology and social cognition (Fiske and Taylor, 1984: 24).

More recently, British scholars with an interest in attribution theory have developed a programme of research based on the study of lay theories. Furnham (1988) has conducted multiple enquiries to explore the ideas people have about a wide range of subjects, from human nature to economics, medicine and statistics. He points out that lay theories can be differentiated from scientific theories in several ways. Lay theories tend to be implicit rather than explicit, inconsistent in their articulation, and tend to confuse cause and effect, among other things (see Furnham, 1988: 2–7). Those who study lay theory, like those using attribution theories, have found that implicit beliefs do affect various forms of behaviour (see Furnham, 1988 for a review of this literature).

Social psychologists have not been the only scholars to focus on lay theories. Cognitive anthropologists (Dougherty, 1985; Holland and Quinn, 1987) have conducted a substantial amount of research in this area, attempting to link membership in a cultural group to particular frameworks for understanding the world (e.g. Kempton, 1987; Price, 1987; Quinn, 1987). Anthropologists tend to describe these frameworks not as lay theories but as 'folk models' of the mind. D'Andrade (1987: 114) explained that:

> This model can be called a 'folk' model both because it is a statement of the common-sense understandings that people use in ordinary life and because it contrasts with various 'specialized' and 'scientific' models of the mind . . . They [informants] *use* the model but they cannot produce a reasonable *description* of the model. In this sense, the model is like a well-learned set of procedures one knows how to carry out rather than a body of fact one can recount.

Sociologists have also been concerned with lay theories since these theories often become institutionalized, and serve as the bases for structures which organize our experience. In particular, sociology offers multiple theoretical approaches for understanding the way individuals construct reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1967), how what a person 'knows' is related to his or her position in the social structure (Longhurst,

1989; Mannheim, 1936), and how one frames or breaks frames of interpretation through language and action (Goffman, 1974).

Some of the most important contributions in this area have come from political scientists who studied the nature of political belief systems among lay people (Converse, 1964; Lane, 1962; Nie et al., 1979). Lane (1962) was a pioneer in the interpretive approach to political psychology, conducting a series of in-depth interviews with a small group of citizens. In an attempt to understand the unique ideological systems and political experiences of his informants, Lane questioned them at length about a variety of topics. The interviews covered a considerable range of issues, from the meanings of democracy and freedom to the nature of utopia. Although the debate over Lane's findings is complex and ongoing (see Kinder and Sears, 1985), Lane has been extremely influential in political science and communications, inspiring those who seek textured approaches to political cognition (e.g. Graber, 1984). However, the goal of this paper is not to explore the nature of general belief systems or ideologies, but to understand a specific set of lay theories in politics — those about the meaning of public opinion. Although academic researchers may lack a shared understanding of public opinion's meaning, average citizens may have more concrete or elaborated notions of its meaning and importance. The present study is devoted primarily to the description of these lay theories and secondarily to the relationship between lay theories and ideology.

Meanings of public opinion

In order to explore how people understand public opinion processes, 21 in-depth, structured interviews were conducted. The approach was phenomenological in nature, since the purpose was to build grounded theory (see Glaser and Strauss, 1967), and not to verify existing theory. For years researchers have used interpretive, qualitative approaches to try and understand how others perceive reality. Many (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982; Bogdan and Taylor, 1975; Giorgi, 1983; Kvale, 1983; Lofland, 1971; Sharrock and Anderson, 1986) have written eloquently about phenomenology and ethnomethodology as tools for discovering the experience of others, so a review here is unnecessary. However, it should be noted that much interpretive work in the social sciences was inspired by Weber's (1978: 8–9) pioneering discussion of *verstehen* or 'understanding'. Weber argued that if one is to understand any type of social action, he or she must identify with the subjects involved, looking at the environment through their eyes. This is difficult, of course, but as Geertz (1976: 224) puts it, 'The trick is not to get yourself into some inner correspondence of spirit with your informants . . . The trick is to figure out what the devil they are up to.'

While in-depth interview techniques often allow researchers to achieve a textured, complex understanding of others, it has problematic aspects. The central disadvantage associated with in-depth interviewing is that it entails a great deal of verbal (and non-verbal) intervention by the researcher, which may affect the nature of the 'data' collected. The principal advantage of in-depth interviewing is that respondents may use their own words, employ their own schemas (Graber, 1984) or frameworks (Crigler et al., 1990), and are given time enough to elaborate on what *they* deem important.

Informants

In addition to my goal of describing lay theories of public opinion, I am interested in how these theories are related to political activity and ideology. As a result, I searched for informants who were committed to political causes and those who were not. After contacting the leaders of several local branches of national grassroots organizations, I was able to obtain names of members from two groups with very different ideological frameworks. Eight of the informants who participated in the study were left-wing political activists trying to change US policies in Central America. Another group of eight were members of the central committee of a state Libertarian Party organization. Five study participants were local residents with very limited interest or involvement in grassroots political activity. These individuals were located through a university alumni office. All informants were residents of the Chicago metropolitan area.

Although many are familiar with the main tenets of Libertarianism, a few words about this philosophy are in order. The Libertarians are a diverse group of individuals who believe, generally, that individual rights should be the centrepiece of political discussion on any topic. The Libertarian Party Platform focuses on the importance of the free market system and emphasizes the detrimental effects of government intervention in human affairs (see Green and Guth, 1987, for a demographic profile of the Libertarian Party, and Bergland, 1986, for detailed explanations of their policy positions). Americans from both established political parties probably ascribe to some Libertarian ideas, but only 8000–10,000 people are currently on the national party mailing list (Walton, 1990).

Five of the informants working to change US policy in Central America were active members of the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES). CISPES was founded in 1980 to protest against American involvement in El Salvador. The organization is large, with over a hundred chapters in cities throughout the country. CISPES engages in multiple forms of political activity from fundraising, public protest and educational outreach to congressional lobbying. Two informants in

the study were members of the Pledge of Resistance, a smaller protest organization devoted to 'non-violent opposition to US war in Central America' (Pledge of Resistance, undated). One informant, who was involved in the sanctuary movement through the Catholic church, worked closely with CISPES, but was not officially a member.

Diversity of informants was important for this study since the goal was to collect and understand as many lay theories as possible. The sample is *purposive* and is not, in any way, meant to reflect the characteristics of a particular population. The group of informants was heterogeneous in many respects — income, occupation, age, religious affiliation, political involvement and ideology varied tremendously. Their ages ranged from 26 to 68.

The informants who spoke with me were well educated. Most of those interviewed had college degrees, although a few left universities without completing degree requirements. A few of the respondents had graduate or professional degrees.

Most of the individuals in the study worked outside of their homes, although some were retired. Occupations varied enormously. The group included: a supermarket stock clerk, a chef, a police officer, a lawyer, two consultants, a social worker and a professional political activist, among others. Their annual household incomes ranged from $7000 to over $60,000.

Interviews

I conducted the interviews in informants' homes, offices or in restaurants. All sessions were audiotaped and later transcribed for analysis. The average interview lasted approximately an hour, 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 few questions, so subsequent questions were eliminated or modified because they were irrelevant or redundant. The informants were asked, among other things:

1. how they defined and thought about public opinion;
2. who or what the 'public' is;
3. whether or not they believed polls reflect public opinion;
4. to describe the relationship between mass media and public opinion.

Since each of the questions in the interview evoked considerable response, this paper will be limited to a discussion of the first topic only — that is, lay theories about the meaning of public opinion.

One central question for informants in this study was, 'What does the phrase "public opinion" mean to you in general?' The answers to this question were extremely varied, yet the definitions and theories informants

articulated about public opinion fell into the four categories outlined above. Public opinion was described as: (1) an aggregation of many *individual* opinions concerning a particular topic; (2) as the opinions of a majority or vocal minority; (3) as a consensus about an issue; or (4) as a fiction, or much too vague a term to be meaningful in serious political discourse.

Public opinion as aggregation

Only a few respondents in this study thought that aggregation of *individual* opinions yields some type of *public* opinion. One of the experienced Libertarian activists, who is in his late 50s, said that:

> I've done a lot of [political volunteer work] of one kind or another so public opinion means, as it were, the vector sum of all those people that I've talked to coming out of the supermarket door [while working on a petition drive], which is a fairly close cross-section of, at least, DuPage County society.

A left-wing activist in her mid-30s said that public opinion simply means people's 'attitudes about issues'. Another younger activist who is a member of the same organization said:

> I think, in general [public opinion is] the . . . attitudes that people have about particular issues. . . There's like the general public sentiment that isn't very deep and beyond that there are people with more . . . y'know, a smaller number of people that really care a lot about particular issues, that have more well-thought-out or maybe deeply felt opinions or attitudes.

One of the leftists felt that public opinion was most definitely *not* a consensus or a 'general will'. When asked about the meaning of public opinion he said: 'I think in our society [public opinion] sort of refers to individual issues, and not so much like a general popular will or . . . a force as such.' Interestingly, these respondents expressing an aggregation-oriented view of public opinion did not necessarily believe that polls, a leading methodology for aggregation, were accurate or reliable. They noted the usual critiques of polls — poor question wording, sampling biases and social desirability effects.

Public opinion as majority opinion

Three of the informants in this study believed that public opinion was synonymous with majority or vocal minority opinion. One young man, who is heavily involved in the Libertarian Party, said that:

> When [the phrase public opinion] is used in the current context by the established groups — the media, the political organizations, and things like that — it usually just means the majority rule . . . Do whatever the majority says, even if it's not right, cause that's how you survive in the political process.

It seems appropriate that two of the informants who believed public opinion to be majority opinion describe themselves as Libertarians. The Libertarians are extremely small in number and claim they have had difficulty getting access to local and national media. Many of them expressed frustration with the obstacles they face in communicating their ideas to the public. Libertarians, although strategic and well-organized, still feel somewhat oppressed by what they see as the uninformed majority in American politics. In general, majority/minority distinctions tend to be very salient to them.

An informant in his 60s, who is active in community affairs but is not particularly active in more ideologically-oriented struggles, noted that public opinion is represented by the majority at times and the minority at others:

> [Public opinion means] the voice of the majority of people. Or maybe people who are willing to speak up. I think there are too many people who . . . the old silent majority that don't voice their opinions because they . . . don't have any hope. They've lost trust and confidence that they will be heard . . . Maybe [public opinion] is just a shrill minority that gets heard.

Public opinion as consensus

Although there were several vague mentions of consensus in my discussions with informants, only one believed that public opinion was 'a consensus of what the ordinary person thinks on various issues'.

It is not surprising that elaborate consensus models of public opinion were virtually absent in these discussions. Conceptualizing how consensus might be reached in a complex, mass society is extremely difficult. Habermas (1974, 1989) is one of the few contemporary scholars writing about the possibility of free, unrestricted public discussion in post-industrial societies and who links this process to the formation of consensus.

Space limitations prevent me from describing in detail the beliefs informants expressed about the mass media in America, but suffice it to say that most think the media are extremely biased — either ideologically or in other respects. As a result, it seems unlikely that informants *could* think of public opinion as a societal consensus: many think the various media outlets provide such dramatically different accounts of reality that we are left with much more conflict than agreement on most issues.

Public opinion as a reification

Lippmann (1965, 1925) argued forcefully that public opinion does not emerge from below, but is a 'phantom' used by particular persons and institutions for their own purposes. This conceptualization of public opinion was by far the most common one expressed by respondents in this study. Many said that public opinion simply does not exist: it is a rhetorical device used to describe media opinion, the opinions of policy and academic elites or pollsters' opinions. Half of the informants (ten people) did not find 'public opinion' to be a useful or particularly meaningful term.

Many informants who believed public opinion to be a fiction argued that the media project their own opinions onto the mass public. One 60-year-old consultant believed that public opinion:

> Has to do with media. I think its original intention was to reflect what the will of the majority is. But I think that [public opinion] is a manipulated term now by the media . . . which is used to their own purposes . . . I think it's a term used by the media to espouse their very liberal views towards society.

A police commander in his 50s said that:

> Public opinion, generally, is what the media tells you. You have no way of validating the process. Generally, through newspapers or television — radio's like in third place in that — television and newspapers will report findings, and polls. If you accept that at face value — that everything is accurate and the poll's been conducted properly and according to statistical methods and everything — you may or may not agree with the poll. The problem I have is that I don't like to take things just on face value — just because it's in the newspaper or it's reported on television.

A 38-year-old woman, who is actively working for left-wing causes, complained that government manipulates the media and the public in turn. She noted that public opinion was:

> The view from the person on the street. That type of thing. A public opinion, I'm afraid, [is] very much what the media allows to be portrayed as public opinion. So what they allow to become part of the debate becomes considered what public opinion is. And, in other words, they frame the debate . . . and it's usually a fairly narrow debate.

Other informants thought public opinion was not a true expression from citizens, but a commodity shaped by opinion pollsters. One young woman, who is actively involved in leftist politics through the Catholic church, found the question about public opinion's meaning very odd and somewhat amusing. She said:

> When I see or hear 'public opinion' I always wonder where it comes from, because I've never been a part of any public opinion (laughs). No one's ever asked me a poll opinion or anything like that. When it comes to polls, I think they can be manipulated to get you whatever answer you want to have. And so when it comes to that kind of public opinion, you can create any kind of public opinion you want. Just depends on the phrasing of questions. So, I'm rather cynical when I hear that.

She continued:

> I think that there are so many differences in how people think that to try to come up with *a* public opinion . . . People don't come down into categories one way or the other. That's what public opinion tries to do. And I don't think it's possible to do.

Another young woman, who had visited Central America, was also sceptical of public opinion and polls in the media. She said:

> Well, I think it's really difficult [to define public opinion]. If you just go up to someone and say . . . ask them a specific question, you know, about abortion or Central America, and they'll [the pollsters] only define it in a very short question, and they have the answer 'yes' or 'no' and tabulate that — if the person's not informed or hasn't thought about the question, or if the question is just simple black and white, and if that's what you're counting as public opinion, I don't think it says a whole lot.

One 42-year-old attorney, who was not interested in or involved in politics, said that public opinion:

> Means media manipulated big business. It means nothing to me. It doesn't reflect anything that's meaningful to me. I'm not affected by the media as much as other people because I don't watch television very much . . . So when some media tells me that 'public opinion says blah, blah, blah' it is meaningless to me.

A secretary in her 50s, who considers herself a Republican, was not involved in politics. Yet she had strong feelings about public opinion. She said:

> Sometimes I wonder [about how they select people for polls]. It is just a mystery to me sometimes. I mean, who is the public? We have in this society all of these special interest groups — we have the women, we have gays, we have the home people [sic]. All of these people that are one issue people. . . I don't look at myself as a one issue person. . . [The public] is whatever group screams the loudest.

One long-time member of the Libertarian Party in his 50s found my questions about public opinion 'ridiculous'. When asked about the meaning of public opinion he said:

> There is no such thing, really, as public opinion. How would you, you're a more or less professional in this, you can't call me and M. or S. and E. [other Libertarians] 'public opinion', you know. By the time you'd [interviewed] even 10 percent of the population, you'd be retiring from the university. Anything else you'd say about public opinion, well, it's meaningless.

Media and the reification of public opinion

The goal of this study was to provide an initial exploration of lay theories or connotations of 'public opinion' found among a group of American citizens. Although all of the theories informants subscribed to are reflected in the academic literature on American politics, most respondents were extremely sceptical about the usefulness of the concept of public opinion. Some informants thought that media, big business, government or a combination of these institutions used the notion of public opinion to reach their own selfish goals. Others were completely baffled by the term, and said that public opinion had no meaning for them at all.

Since almost all of the informants in this study were thoughtful, well-educated people, their scepticism of public opinion was compelling: respondents understood well how public opinion is measured and how it is discussed by elites, but they were generally unwilling to accept these meanings. Although one would expect this type of critical analysis from political activists, all but one of the non-activists saw public opinion as a reification also.

Numerous theorists, working in different epistemological traditions, have written about reification in a variety of contexts. Much of this theorizing has been done by Marxists and neo-Marxists, who draw on the works of Hegel, Feuerbach, Marx, and Lukács. Summing up this line of argument Gajo Petrovic (1983: 411) has argued that reification is a 'special case of alienation', defining it as:

> The act (or result of the act) of transforming human properties, relations and actions into properties, relations and actions of man-produced things which have become independent (and which are imagined as originally independent) of man and govern his life.

Lippmann and others have argued that public opinion is an example of reification, although theorists of public opinion do not normally use such terminology. It seems clear from my conversations with activists and non-activists, that they are also speaking about public opinion in the context of alienation. There was a general feeling, shared by many informants, that public opinion formation processes were somehow *out of their hands* — that *they* were not part of 'public opinion'. The activists felt particularly frustrated by this notion, since they sought to be recognized as important,

informed members of the public with something to say about American domestic and foreign policies.

Polls, media and public space

The findings in this study are tentative, since the group interviewed was a small one. Yet the difficulty these individuals had in believing that public opinion *has* a meaning should give pause to researchers who employ the term. Scholars tend to use the concept of public opinion freely, but many of the people it supposedly describes resist our definitions.

Although one goal of this study was to explore linkages between ideology and connotations of public opinion, no such relationships were found. Activists and non-activists, from different places on the political spectrum, shared many of the same attitudes about the nature of public opinion.

Recently, in academe and in the popular press, there has been considerable discussion about the 'shrinking' public sphere (Rodger, 1985; Carey 1987; Lasch, 1990). Informants in this study seemed to think that the free-flowing open discussion, characteristic of the ideal Habermasian public sphere, does not exist. On the contrary, there was much cynicism about the role of polls, media and corporations in warping and limiting America's public space. Political activists find the lack of lively, unrestricted political discourse especially frustrating given that they seek opportunities to educate and persuade the populace.

Informants in this study were quite sophisticated about the problems of public opinion polling. Their critiques of polls, and their statements about the ability of surveys to dampen or narrow public discourse, echo Bourdieu's attacks on this methodology. Polls were, in many respects, oppressive to these individuals: the quantitative data polls provide make certain public discussions irrelevant or extremely difficult to stimulate. Polls are believed to suppress critical thinking, and to dictate the questions a society asks itself as well as the range of possible answers. The people I spoke with seemed to understand just how polling restricts debate on their *own* issues of concern.

There are many avenues left unexamined by this small, exploratory study. Media researchers, with an expertise in interpretive methodology, are in an especially good position to conduct research on the social construction of public opinion. Since many citizens believe there is a conflation of media and public opinion, we can use specific programmes as foci for interviews about opinion formation. Also, there may be a relationship between media use and citizen insights about the public sphere. Although I asked informants about their media use, I did not concentrate on the link between these behaviours and definitions of public opinion.

Another important line of enquiry should concern the relationships

between ideology, social characteristics, political involvement and lay theories of politics. Although there is insufficient evidence here to draw conclusions about these relationships, they might be elucidated by more research. In particular, one's political knowledge and sophistication may be correlated with adherence to one or another theory about public opinion processes.

Researchers might also study mainstream political activists in addition to the more marginalized, extreme groups studied here. Although activists in this study were not particularly radical (the Libertarians did not advocate anarchism, for example), they were generally not involved in the local Democratic or Republican parties. If we are to make links between political action and lay theories, we need to study a variety of paths to political involvement. Participant observation, in addition to personal interviews, will most probably yield interesting insights about the link between *theories* of public opinion and strategies for *influencing* it.

Currently, there are a variety of prescriptive and normative theories of public opinion (see Noelle-Neumann, 1984 and Kinder and Sears, 1985 for a review), but very few descriptive ones. If scholars are to develop more textured, meaningful theories of public opinion, media, and social action, they should consider analyses of political discourse as seen through the eyes of laypeople.

Bibliography

Andersen, K. (1988) 'Sources of Pro-family Beliefs: A Cognitive Approach', *Political Psychology*, 9: 229–43.
Berger, P. and T. Luckmann (1967) *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York: Anchor Books.
Bergland, D. (1986) *Libertarianism in One Lesson*. Costa Mesa, CA: Orpheus Publications.
Blumer, H. (1948) 'Public Opinion and Public Opinion Polling', *American Sociological Review*, 13: 242–9.
Bogdan, R. and S. Biklen (1982) *Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theory and Methods*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
Bodgan, R. and S. Taylor (1975) *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods: A Phenomenological Approach to the Social Sciences*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
Bourdieu, P. (1979) 'Public Opinion Does Not Exist', pp. 124–30 in A. Mattelart and S. Siegelaub (eds), *Communication and Class Struggle*. New York: International General.
Bryce, J. (1984) *The American Commonwealth*. New York: Macmillan.
Carey, J. (1987) 'The Press and the Public Discourse', *The Center Magazine*, 20: 4–32.
Childs, H. (1965) *Public Opinion: Nature, Formation, and Role*. Princeton: D. van Nostrand.
Converse, J. (1987) *Survey Research in the United States: Roots and Emergence 1890–1960*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Converse, P. (1964) 'The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics', in D. Apter (ed.), *Ideology and Discontent*. New York: Free Press.
Crigler, A., M. Just and R. Neuman (1990) 'Cognitive and Affective Frames of Political News', Paper presented at the meeting of the International Society of Political Psychology, Washington, DC.
D'Andrade, R. (1987) 'A Folk Model of the Mind', pp. 122–50 in D. Holland and N. Quinn (eds) *Cultural Models in Language and Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
de Tocqueville, A. (1969) *Democracy in America*. New York: Anchor. (Original work published 1848.)
Dougherty, J. (1985) *Directions in Cognitive Anthropology*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
Feuerbach, L. (1957) *The Essence of Christianity*. New York: Harper & Row.
Fiske, S. and S. Taylor (1984) *Social Cognition*. New York: Random House.
Frank, J. and J. Rivard (1986) 'Antinuclear Admirals — An Interview Study', *Political Psychology*, 7: 23–52.
Furnham, A. (1988) *Lay Theories: Everyday Understanding of Problems in the Social Sciences*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
Gallup, G. and S. Rae (1968) *The Pulse of Democracy*. New York: Greenwood. (Original work published in 1940.)
Geertz, C. (1976) 'From the Native's Point of View', pp. 221–38 in K. Basso and H. Selby (eds), *Meaning in Anthropology*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
Gildin, H. (1983) *Rousseau's Social Contract: The Design of the Argument*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Ginsberg, B. (1986) *The Captive Public*. New York: Basic Books.
Giorgi, A. (1983) 'Concerning the Possibility of Phenomenological Psychological Research', *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 14: 129–69.
Glaser, B. and A. Strauss (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
Goffman, E. (1974) *Frame Analysis*. New York: Harper.
Graber, D. (1984) *Processing the News: How People Tame the Information Tide*. New York: Longman.
Green, J. and J. Guth (1987) 'The Sociology of Libertarians', *Liberty*, 1: 5–12.
Habermas, J. (1974) 'The Public Sphere', *New German Critique*, 1: 49–55.
Habermas, J. (1989) *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into A Category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Heider, F. (1958) *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
Herbst, S. (1992) 'Surveys in the Public Sphere: Applying Bourdieu's Critique of Opinion Polls', *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 4: 220–9.
Herbst, S. (1993) *Numbered Voices: How Opinion Polling Has Shaped American Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Hobson, D. (1991) 'Soap Operas at Work', pp. 150–67 in E. Seiter, H. Borchers, G. Kreutzner and E. Warth (eds), Remote Control: Television, Audiences, and Cultural Power. London: Routledge.
Holland, D. and N. Quinn (1987) *Cultural Models in Language and Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Jensen, K. (1990) 'The Politics of Polysemy', *Media, Culture and Society*, 12: 57–77.
Keesing, R. (1987) 'Models, "Folk" and "Cultural": Paradigms Regained?' pp. 369–93 in D. Holland and N. Quinn (eds), *Cultural Models in Language and Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kempton, W. (1987) 'Two Theories of Home Heat Control', pp. 222–39 in D. Holland and N. Quinn (eds), *Cultural Models in Language and Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Key, V.O. (1964) *Public Opinion and American Democracy*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
Kinder, D. and D. Sears (1985) 'Public Opinion and Political Action', in G. Lindzey and E. Aronson (eds), *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, Vol. 2. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
Kvale, S. (1983) 'The Qualitative Research Interview: A Phenomenological and Hermeneutical Mode of Understanding', *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 14: 171–97.
Lamb, K. (1974) *As Orange Goes: Twelve California Families and the Future of American Politics*. New York: W.W. Norton.
Lane, R. (1962) *Political Ideology: Why the American Common Man Believes What He Does*. New York: Free Press.
Lasch, C. (1990) 'The Lost Art of Political Argument', *Harper's Magazine*, September: 17–22.
Libertarian Party (1987) *The 1988 Libertarian Party Platform*. (Available from The Libertarian Party, 1528 Pennsylvania Ave, Washington, DC 20003).
Liebes, T. and E. Katz (1990) *The Export of Meaning: Cross-cultural Readings of Dallas*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Lippmann, W. (1925) *The Phantom Public*. New York: Harcourt, Brace.
Lippmann, W. (1965) *Public Opinion*. New York: Free Press. (Original work published 1922.)
Locke, J. (1894) *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Alexander Campbell Fraser (ed.). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Lofland, J. (1971) *Analyzing Social Settings. A Guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
Longhurst, B. (1989) *Karl Mannheim and the Contemporary Sociology of Knowledge*. New York: St Martin's Press.
Lukács, G. (1975) *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, R. Livingstone (trans.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Mannheim, K. (1936) *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
Morley, D. (1980) *The 'Nationwide' Audience: Structure and Decoding*. London: British Film Institute.
Nie, N., S. Verba and J. Petrocik (1979) *The Changing American Voter*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Noelle-Neumann, E. (1984) *The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion — Our Social Skin*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
Palmer, P. (1964) 'The Concept of Public Opinion in Political Theory', pp. 230–57 in C. Wittke (ed.), *Essays in History and Political Theory in Honor of Charles Howard McIlwain*, New York: Russell & Russell.
Page, B. and R. Shapiro (1992) *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Petrovic, G. (1983) 'Reification', pp. 411–13 in T. Bottomore (ed.), *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
Plano, J. and M. Greenberg (1982) *The American Politics Dictionary*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
Pledge of Resistance (undated) *Pledge of Resistance* [Information sheet available from Chicago Religious Task Force on Central America, 59 E. Van Buren, Suite 1400, Chicago, IL 60605].

Price, L. (1987) 'Ecuadorian Illness Stories: Cultural Knowledge in Natural Discourse', pp. 313–42 in D. Holland, and N. Quinn (eds), *Cultural Models in Language and Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Quinn, N. (1987) 'Convergent Evidence for a Cultural Model of American Marriage', pp. 173–94 in D. Holland and N. Quinn (eds), *Cultural Models in Language and Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Rodger, J. (1985) 'On the Degeneration of the Public Sphere', *Political Studies*, 33: 203–17.
Rousseau, J.J. (1950) *The Social Contract and Discourses*, translated and edited by G. Cole. New York: E.P. Dutton. (Original work published 1755.)
Sanders, A. (1989) 'Ideological Symbols', *American Politics Quarterly*, 17: 227–55.
Seiter, E., H. Borchers, G. Kreutzner and E. Warth (1991) *Remote Control: Television, Audiences, and Cultural Power*. London: Routledge.
Shafritz, J. (1988) *The Dorsey Dictionary of American Government*, Chicago: Dorsey Press.
Sharrock, W. and B. Anderson (1986) *The Ethnomethodologists*. London: Tavistock.
Smith, E. and A. Zurcher (1968) *Dictionary of American Politics*. New York: Barnes & Noble Books.
Sperber, H. and T. Trittschuh (1962) *American Political Terms: An Historical Dictionary*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
Sussman, B. (1988) *What Americans Really Think and Why Our Politicians Pay No Attention*. New York: Pantheon.
Walton, S. (1990) Chair, Libertarian Party of Illinois. Personal communication, July.
Weber, M. (1978) *Economy and Society*, edited by G. Roth and C. Wittich. Berkeley: University of California Press. (Original work published 1922.)
Wellman, D. (1977) *Portraits of White Racism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Winkler, A. (1984) 'Public Opinion', pp. 1031–41 in J. Greene (ed.), *Encyclopedia of American Political History*. New York: Charles Scribner.

Beyond the state: civil society and the Nigerian press under military rule

Adigun Agbaje
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE, UNIVERSITY OF IBADAN

Introduction

Not very long ago, it used to be said of Africa, to appropriate Antonio Gramsci's description of Czarist Russia, that 'the state was everything' and that, at best, 'civil society was primordial and gelatinous' (McLellan, 1979: 189). The dominant perspective then was that the state was everywhere (Azarya, 1988: 10), seeking dominance and centrality and intruding into every facet of the social formation. On the other hand, civil society, an 'arena where manifold social movements . . . and civic organizations from all classes . . . attempt to constitute themselves in an ensemble of arrangements so that they can express themselves and advance their interests' (Stepan, 1988: 3–4), was considered basically embryonic and a captive of the all-pervading state. Statist perspectives, therefore, were seen as a most effective way of capturing the essence of Africa. Within that framework, emphasis was placed on a study of formal structures of government and of political society as central features of the African situation (Carter Center, 1989: 1).

This preference was largely a result of a conjuncture of certain historical forces and developments at the level of theory, policy preference and practice. First was the context in which, in the dying days of colonial rule, Western scholarship became involved in and dominated (from the 1940s and 1950s) the young field of African Studies. Second was the subsequent rigidity and inability of African Studies in Africa in the several decades thereafter to move, in line with new trends and perspectives in Western scholarship, beyond the theoretical and programmatic concerns of this earlier encounter.

Media, Culture and Society (SAGE, London, Newbury Park and New Delhi), Vol. 15 (1993), 455–472