

Sphera Publica

REVISTA DE CIENCIAS SOCIALES Y DE LA COMUNICACIÓN

sphera.ucam.edu

ISSN: 1576-4192 • Número 18 • Vol. II • Año 2018 • pp. 117-131

Folkcommunication and social group strategies: Aspects of public opinion in the mass media society

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Recibido: 13/07/18 • Aceptado: 16/12/18 • Publicado: 20/12/18

How to reference this paper: Woitowicz, K. J. & Gadini, S. L. (2018). Folkcommunication and social group strategies: Aspects of public opinion in the mass media society, *Sphera Publica*, 2(18), 117-131.

Abstract

This paper aims at developing a theoretical trajectory through the notion of public opinion from the mass media processes in a perspective that recognizes resistance practices and strategies of insertion in the public sphere which are made possible by social groups and sectors of the civil society. From the perspective of folkcommunication – a Brazilian theory originally formulated by Luiz Beltrão in the 1960s – communicational processes are understood as marked simultaneously by hegemonic and peripheral flows which lead to articulations between the mass media and the informal and horizontal instruments of popular communication. In such scenery, the reconfiguration of the role of opinion leaders leads to the reflection on the use of media as an activism practice aiming at conquering spaces in the public sphere.

Keywords

Folkcommunication, popular communication, public opinion, marginalized groups, activism

Introduction

Recognizing the dynamic character of communicational processes in the articulation of massive and popular flows, and their implication in the public opinion formation is the starting point for the reflections presented in this paper, which is based on the theoretical reference of folkcommunication to observe and discuss the relations between the media sphere and the forms of manifestation of the so-called marginalized (social) groups.

In order to achieve that, some notions such as public sphere, opinion leaders and media activism, which are relevant to the theme under study and form a set of references for some reflection around the public opinion formation process based on the folkcommunication assumptions, are presented.

This is an incursion through the debate about public formation and mass media visibility, in which the dynamics of the hegemonic media and the singular forms of production and circulation of information processed by social groups are considered. The folkcommunication theory, in this context, offers a suitable conceptual base which is necessary to comprehend the popular and mass communication flows, in dialogue or confrontation with the civil society perspectives.

The methodological reference that guides the elaboration of this text is a bibliographical, based on the approach of the concepts of Folkcommunication (Beltrao, 2001; 2004), in dialogue (approach and difference) with the perspective of Jurgen Habermas (1984) around sphere public, the concept of opinion leader (Beltrao, 1980; Cervi, 2007) and the characterization of Brazilian socio-cultural scenario. From the dialogues between the approaches of these and other authors cited throughout the essay, the pioneering contribution of Luiz Beltrão (1971) stands out, which, based on regional folk expressions and manifestations of popular culture, formulates the concept - which here also serves as a methodological horizon - of Folkcommunication.

In this way, the popular communication, characterized as a form of expression of the marginalized groups, presents itself as a space where one can produce and circulate contrasting discourses, inscribed in the dynamics of civil society and marked by the

experiences of popular culture. It is, therefore, a theoretical course that seeks to value the approach developed by Luiz Beltrão to explain the reality of his time and, at the same time, to update the author's perspectives on the current demands.

Media and the public sphere conflicts

One of the most important concepts in the debate about public formation is, without doubt, the notion of public sphere, discussed by Jurgen Habermas (1984) in a study published in 1961 (German version), even if such concept is always polemic and questioned by critics in several perspectives. There is not, therefore, a consensus around “public sphere” nowadays, but undoubtedly the historical approach justifies its contextual importance.

The bourgeoisie public sphere can be initially understood as a sphere of individuals gathered as a group; they claim this public sphere regulated by authority, but directly against the authority itself, in order to discuss with it the general exchange laws in the fundamentally private sphere, but publicly relevant, the laws of interchange of goods and social work. (Habermas, 1984, p.42).

Habermas refers to the – long and complicated – Middle Age European societies trajectory to the ‘modernity’, from mid XVII century and throughout the following one (XVIII), marked by processes of increasing urbanization and emergence of social spaces of circulation, where dwellers or visitors (in general immigrants) could find space to manifest their opinions and ideas about collective interest subjects and problems. Tea houses, ‘literary’ salons, cafés, galleries, promenades, theatres, squares and other meeting venues where the conversation, and varied motivations, led to the formation of ways of thinking, living and acting of those actors and contributors who moved from one to another place in the main cities of Europe in (re)formulation. Therefore, the emergence and strengthening of cultural spaces (of collective access, even if restricted to certain social groups) provided the basis to the process of ‘public’ opinion formation. Cultural space and political intervention became, therefore, fields of dispute, dialogue and interaction.

The public sphere constitution process in contemporaneity is understood as assuming the media presence and action. Initially, it was seen as a tool to keep power relations, later on

the media started to be recognized as an indispensable structure to the articulation between the different groups and individuals nowadays. Ângela Cristina Salgueiro Marques (2006, p. 26) pointed out that

A public sphere is formed from the communicational activity, when different public groups organize themselves into articulated communicative networks to discuss themes or causes of common interest, to defend positions and express opinions.

While recovering the central concepts of Habermas' work, Ângela Cristina Salgueiro Marques (2006) observed that this philosopher proposes to think media as a space which comprises center (political elite, formal institutions) and periphery (civil society sectors). In this sense, they analyze the coexistence of competing public spheres in the rings that form both the center and the periphery, which represent formal and informal powers.

Similar approach was adopted by Rousiley Maia (2006, p. 12) when highlighting the media potential "to transpose face-to-face communication from restrict contexts to wider audiences; in order to create simultaneous communication networks with content originated in different social sectors". For this author (2006, p. 25),

The media field offers possibilities or difficulties to the other agents, in some cases with enough intensity to cause rupture in roles, dispositions and situations in the political field.

The context of this study is focused on considering that the individuals who take part in the public sphere constitution move between the communicative flows of center and periphery, creating a kind of social participation through informal and horizontal instruments. In this sense, the concept of media public sphere can be related to the practices of interchange between popular and massive practices assumed in the folkcommunication theory.

Another relevant concept in this debate is the 'opinion leader', who integrates the formation of opinion processes and relations. This is due to the fact that the public opinion is a process in constant construction, which results from the forms of intervention of the several actors taking part in the interactions (and tensions) in a certain social space.

Emerson Cervi (2007) drew attention to the existence of opinion leaders with a more vertical action ("those identified with the occupants of high visibility positions" in the media) and the

horizontal (“who plays a fundamental role in spreading information and in shaping opinions in small social groups”).

While the former is, according to some authors, more identified with the image of opinion maker (not necessarily with social leadership action)¹, the latter is closer to the folk-mediator, according to Luiz Beltrão’s perspective. In both cases, besides knowledge and social transit, charisma, credibility, public respect and ability to mediate in the intervention social groups are fundamental characteristics.

However, it is relevant to consider that the perspective of a public sphere, where disputes around ideas, projects or ways of thinking are processed, has been considerably broadened, but it is still current, with the increasing complexity of social relations. Consequently, in the time of digital networks, the opinion leader figure has also become more fluid, plural and multifaceted.

That is true because the leader figure in the social network era is not timeless, since it registers several variations, at the same proportion as the displacement of interests, content, comment or post sharing, provokes constant and many times unpredictable reconfigurations and, making the possible influence scenery – which was the opinion leaders’ role in the pre-networks era – marked by the presence or action of countless actors who, for several reasons or motivations, become momentarily reference of shared information.

Within this perspective, since the presence of actors with effective profile, post and opinion update on the most diverse topics, as it seems, tends more to the maker – or influencer – of public opinion, than to the opinion leader.

The speed of information – a characteristic of the contemporary media society – has broadened the concept of public opinion maker, to beyond the presence dimension and with assumed persuasion abilities regarding choices or ways of thinking. In this scenery, some reflection is proposed upon the interfaces between massive and popular communication flows in the public sphere.

¹ It seems relevant to consider here, that not all opinion maker can be said or be socially recognized as an opinion leader. At some point, however, both actions can intercalate or even overlap. But this is a theme for another debate, mainly in the information networks era, in which the reconfiguration of social roles registers constant changes.

Folkcommunication: mediations between pop culture and media culture

Folkcommunication, when guided by the ways of expressing ideas and opinions put forward by marginalized groups, assumes a kind of action in the public sphere which contemplates the culture and communication dynamics. Luiz Beltrão, a Brazilian researcher who created the folkcommunication theory in the 1960s, understood the folkcommunicational expressions as informal means of communication which oppose the hegemonic values, either in social or in cultural terms².

Therefore, popular cultural manifestations become means of communication that not only express certain idea, but also represent some kind of action or protest of the marginalized groups. According to Beltrão (1971), folklore comprises interpersonal or group forms of cultural manifestation of the lower classes and folkcommunication is based on the use of artisanal mechanisms to express messages in a popular language.

It is from the observation of communication informal means used by the lower class groups that Beltrão recognizes the popular communication agents' role. For this author, there are several "means through which less cultured and economically more fragile classes in the urban and rural societies get informed and crystallize their opinion as an action". (2001, p. 74).

Based on these aspects of popular culture valorization and comprehension of means of communication which are marginalized in the cultural industry, it is possible to comprehend the representativeness of Beltrão's thought when studying communicational processes. By

² Luiz Beltrão was a *Pernambucano* who was Born in Olinda on 08th August 1918. He is known as the pioneer of the scientific research in the Communication area in Brazil and creator of the Folkcommunication, a legitimate Brazilian communication theory. He also founded the Instituto de Ciências e Comunicação (ICINFORM) (Sciences and Communication Institute) and the magazine *Comunicações & Problemas* (Communication and Problems), first Communication Sciences magazine. He was the first Doctor in Communication in Brazil, presenting the thesis "Folkcommunication: a study of the agents and popular means of information of facts and expression of ideas" ("Folkcomunicação: um estudo dos agentes e dos meios populares de informação de fatos e expressão de idéias") at the University of Brasília, in 1967. He died in Brasília, in 1986, leaving and extensive research material, books, texts about folkcommunication, mass communication, popular culture, journalism and research on communication (for further information see: Portal Luiz Beltrão: <http://www2.metodista.br/unesco/luizbeltrao/luizbeltrao.htm>).

denying a deterministic view of the media influence on individuals, the folkcommunication theory enables the appearance of other perspectives, in which the social groups' ability to resist and their particular communication forms, which contrast with hegemonic values, are inserted in the complex dynamics of the communication process.

According to Antonio Hohlfeldt (2003, p. 02), folkcommunication is

[...] the study of communicational procedures through which popular culture manifestations or folklore are expanded, socialized, and live with other communicational chains, suffering changes through the influence of mass and industrialized communication or are changed when appropriated by these complexes.

Folkcommunication comprises, besides the aspects of everyday life and popular knowledge valorization, the reference to the conditions and perspectives of lower classes groups – who, as Beltrão pointed out, are characterized as “marginalized”. Luiz Beltrão classified these groups into three categories: rural marginalized groups, urban marginalized groups and culturally marginalized groups (rural and urban). The latter are characterized as presenting “contestation contingents to the principles, moral or social structure” (2004, p. 84). As an example, the author identifies as contestation groups the messianic, political-activists and porno-erotic groups. The culturally marginalized groups were described by Beltrão as:

Comprising marginalized individuals due to their contestation of the current social organization and culture, as they adopt philosophy and/or political views opposing to the ideas and practices current in their communities. Therefore, either forced or voluntarily, these groups are segregated from the others which, however, try to attract them to their ranks, by employing in their proselytism methods and means which are accessible to the rural and urban public to whom their message is destined, either conventional or folk, which they manage with ability and boldness. (1980, p. 103)

These culturally marginalized groups can be said to elaborate a resistance culture through informal means of communication, simultaneously to establishing dialogues and oppositions to the mass media referential. Therefore, they establish ways of acting in society and taking part in the public sphere which articulate the ‘center’ and the ‘periphery’ through the contrasts between hegemonic content and social group demands.

Opinion leaders and media activism

Among its contributions to the understanding of logic, dynamics and processes which involve the production and reception of messages, the folkcommunication theory recovers the concept of opinion leader. Luiz Beltrão leaned on contesting the research of Lazarsfeld, Merton, Katz, who tried to show that the means of communication had direct influence on the acceptance of ideas. Beltrão's investigations considered that the effect of the means was not as efficient as imagined, so that the influence, even if existing, was not determining. It was from this insight that Beltrão discussed the "two-level flow of communication", considering the opinion leader's role, an actor who was able to have some influence on the social environment.³ Therefore, between the means of communication and the public, the leaders take the role of mediators

The opinion leader has his ability: being the translator, who not only can find the words but also de arguments which touch the pre-logical forms which, according to Levy Bruhl, Bastide, Malinowsky and other sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists, characterize the thought and guide the conduct of such social groups. (2004, p. 39)

It is interesting to notice that although Beltrão was based on this model of two-level communication flow to explain the communicational phenomena, he recognized that it was not only the diffusion of two stages, but "multiple stages, comprising means, leaders with their closest group, leaders with other leaders and, finally with the great folk audience" (2001, p. 79). That is, there was a complex process of mediations and interactions which prevented the emission and reception of messages from being considered as something linear and pre-defined. As Antonio Hohlfeldt (2005, p. 11) analyzes,

It becomes clear, therefore, that the opinion leader's function is not to dominate or alienate, only taking new values of the alien society to the native one, but rather provide true communication, to the extent that if on the one hand it introduces innovations in the more traditional society, on the other hand it spreads the values of the same society to other social segments.

³ Beltrão (2004) observed, from data provided by the Columbia University Applied Social Research Department, that the following aspects of "two-level communication flow" were verified:

1. That the influence of other people on specific decisions tend to be more frequent – and certainly more effective – than that of the collective means of communication;
2. that those who influence and those who are influenced keep close relationships and, consequently, tend to share the same social situation characteristics;
3. that very closely related individuals tend to have common opinions and attitudes and struggle to abandon the group consensus, even if the arguments of collective means of communication appeal to them;
4. That although the influence goes from the more to the less interested individuals the latter must have enough interest to be susceptible to changes" (2004, p. 37)

Therefore, there is a process which contemporarily has been named hybridism (Melo, 1998), and is characterized by the co-existence of different and sometimes even contradictory cultural and moral values in certain societies.

Luiz Beltrão dedicated his studies to the understanding of folkcommunication as an artisanal and horizontal process. This happened because for him folkcommunicational messages, similarly to the interpersonal communication “is elaborated, coded and transmitted in languages and channels familiar to the audience, which is in turn known psychologically and lived by the communicator, even if dispersed” (1980, p. 28). Beltrão also explained the folkcommunicational system:

In the folkcommunication system, although the existence and use, in certain cases, of indirect and industrialized modalities and indirect channels [...], the manifestations are mainly the result of an artisanal activity of the communicator-agent, while its diffusion process develops horizontally, taking into consideration that the characteristic users receive messages through a proper intermediate or in one of the multiple stages of its diffusion. (1980, p. 27)

This author also valued the so-called “collective communication”, seeking to understand how individuals and social groups receive, interpret and (re)signify messages, from their own cultural references. Therefore, in the reception field, Beltrão analyzed non-hegemonic communication processes taking some elements to observe the collective behavior and the reaction of the audience. These factors of influence were described by Beltrão:

1. the personality of organized groups to whom communication is directed and from whom the way of being and acting as a leading unit in the community is assumed to be known;
2. the community socio-economic and cultural situation as a whole, taking into consideration ethnical factors, ecological conditions, development index, educational level, guiding philosophical principles;
3. political guidelines and the influence of the ruling elites on the whole, considering the relevant role of political leaders and the reflexes of their thought and activity in the collective awareness and action;
4. the psychological scenery in the global contemporaneity, since our community is not isolated but is part of a physical world and the whole human kind, therefore, reflecting on and changing the reactions of everything which affects our planet (nature) and the international society (human species). (2001, p. 56)

In a reinterpretation of the folkcommunication, Osvaldo Trigueiro (2006) updates the notion of ‘opinion leader’ used by Luiz Beltrão and recognizes in these individuals’ practices a kind of activism and participation in the public sphere through informal means of communication.

According to this author,

The communicator agents in the folkcommunication system, as defined by the author as folk communicators, have certain prestige in their reference group, regardless of their social and economic position; they have more access to other information sources, mainly from massive means; they are always in contact with different groups with which they keep new interchanges and, at the same time, remain linked to their local cultural references. The folk communicators are activist mediators in the audience negotiations of media messages which circulate in the several stages of diffusion in the social groups of local reference interconnected by the interpersonal communication systems (Trigueiro, 2006, p. 03)

For this author, media activists might operate in informal spheres of popular cultural production and in the formal or institutional spheres, “effecting connections between their own world experience and the others’, notably live, on the radio and on TV” (2006, p. 06). As a result of this function, the media activists gain importance in the fights for citizenship and in public sphere struggles.

In this new space, the importance of media activists who act in participative citizenship movements in folkcommunicational systems is recognized, as communicator agents linked to the cultural movements which use strategies that legitimate their participation as citizens who are aware of their role in the civil society organization. These social actors operate communication devices in the cooperation and solidarity networks between people, groups and co-existing communities which are closely related and linked through kinship, neighborhood, life history, and who find in the solidarity network an alternative of social survival. (Trigueiro, 2006, p. 10)

It is also in this perspective that the notion of media activist can be related to the concept of radical media employed by John Downing.⁴ The multiple impacts proposed by communication initiatives characterized as activism demonstrate the constitution of an alternative public sphere, sustained by counter-hegemonic views. Therefore, the folkcommunication interest in understanding and investigating how informal communication practices of social groups are processed horizontally is noticed, as well as the “appropriations” of mass communication by the individuals through the interchange of messages which move from the mass culture to the popular culture. In this context, it is possible to discuss the opinion leaders’ (or media activists) role in the process of public opinion formation, so that the conditions of access and cultural production of marginalized social groups can be contemplated.

⁴ For John Downing (2003), the term radical media refers to the media (in general small scale and under several different forms) which expresses an alternative view of hegemonic policies, priorities and perspectives.

Critic currentness and culture as (citizen) mediation

In times of more access to consumer goods, either through credit access facilitation or recovery of the purchase power of wages for over 30 million Brazilian workers (when compared to the two previous decades), the economy official indicators point to the enlargement of the middle class sector. This, of course, considering consumption indicators, purchase power and access to services which, up to the early 1990s tended to exclude most of the population. Except for the manifestations with electoral purposes, it seems to be difficult to find in Brazil, in this context, any analyses which are able to question the sense of statements which present broadening of the middle class and the reconfiguration of actors in the country social map.

Even if in a contrasting tone, it is relevant to remember here the speech of the sociologist Jesse Souza⁵ who emphasized that, for the traditional urban middle classes, the cultural capital is still an important reference. Since considering the social gaps which allow one of the largest inequality margins in the population salary average, it is somehow difficult to get convinced that few – even if fundamental, considering the standards of a country with 195 million inhabitants – improvements in income distribution might permit some nationalist boasting in the interpretation of popular access to property, services and consumer goods. Also, because such indicators have not yet made possible to approach the access to the cultural consumer goods, which are still distant from most tax payers, such as theater, cinema and musical productions which are not included in the industrial commercial strategies, among other products. Questioned about the situation of social classes in Brazil, Jessé Souza (2013) explains it from another perspective:

There are basically four. The upper class with its economic capital. The middle class, which is not as privileged as the upper one, but can still appropriate some valued cultural capital, scientific knowledge, post-graduation, foreign languages, some knowledge with economic value. These two are the privileged classes. For the upper class, the most important is the economic capital, however, the cultural capital has its function. And for the

⁵“To the middle class what prevails is the cultural capital”, according to this professor interview to the *O Globo* newspaper on 21/03/2013. Available at <http://oglobo.globo.com/economia/para-classe-media-que-prevalece-o-capital-cultural-7914177#ixzz2PX0uxTMq>

middle class what prevails is the cultural capital, although some economic capital is also necessary.

In the same interview, this sociologist also analyzes which classes are considered 'without privilege', regarding their access to economic, cultural and social capital. According to Jessé Souza (2013),

Popular classes do not have privileged access to economic, cultural or social capital, and will not have access to important people. They have to work since very early in life, they are fighters. This is the new 'worsened' working class (called by the economists the "new middle class"). They were included because there is a place in the market for them, they have income, plans and long term consumption, but this does not make them middle class. The other 'non-privileged' class comprises very poor people, who have no pre-condition to learn, and are called 'scum' in a provocative manner. For the middle and upper classes, the existence of a 'scum' is good, because they provide the services that the European and American middle classes cannot have any more such as somebody to cook or look after the children. This is the invisible class struggle, which is typically Brazilian.

It is in such scenery, usually marked by social struggle, that the figure of an opinion leader as mediator of information demands of public interest and the constant offer of 'standardized' versions – in general under the editorial guidance of great groups of the business media – is presented, suggesting that the folkcommunicational perspective registers relevant currentness to the communication studies, maybe with more emphasis in Latin-American countries, due to their peculiarity of constant social transformation sceneries.

Final Considerations

Throughout this paper, an attempt to follow a trajectory through the notion of public opinion from media processes, in a perspective which identifies or recognizes resistance practices and the strategies of insertion in the public sphere made possible by the social groups and the civil society sectors, was presented. It is in this context that Trigueiro's (2006) reflection on the multiple negotiation fields existing between the media networks and the everyday communication networks reveals its relevance.

This author's (Trigueiro 2006) reflection is sound, mainly in times when the media business groups which are considered traditional go through a crisis in the indicators of search by hegemonic products, such as the fall in circulation of daily papers or even the low audience

indices of open TV channels. Such indicators reveal behavioral transformations, since this is nothing to do with economic impact, even because the workers' purchase power has shown some improvement, even if slow and limited.

As it is noticed, the growing adhesion to information social networks indicates a situation of displacement from the conventional positions of emission/reception of cultural products. And, even if the same media traditional groups seek (self)legitimization through the updated circulation of digital versions, maybe in an attempt to guarantee certain assumed 'prestige' points of audience and adhesion, the re-elaboration of content by social actors historically excluded from the access to the media production points to perspectives which have not been sufficiently explored in the cultural field.

The impacts or consequences of such transformations have not been evaluated either regarding their developments and effects on the consumption relation or even the behavioral changes of their respective consumers. In this scenery of unfinished migration between analogue and digital, it is still early to make any conclusive affirmation on the role and influence of possible opinion leaders in the political and cultural disputes.

This mediation process might then be considered as a way of acting on the formation of public opinion, to the extent that it implies the recognition and visibility of specific demands of the excluded and marginalized social groups.

Therefore, the debate between mediations (always tense and not less polemic) in the mass and popular communicational flows in the constitution of the public sphere of the contemporary complex societies still sees folkcommunication as a fertile field of conceptual suggestions to resume the discussion on variations which mark the processes of consumption and circulation of cultural goods in the media scenery.

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