



ORIGINAL PAPER

Interpreting Manipulation in the Process of Political Communication

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Abstract

The functional objective of any communicative act must, in fact, be defined by the persuasive capacity of the communicator in conjunction with the method of information dissemination while also encompassing the parameters of comprehension associated with the individual or group identity of the receiver or receivers. Simply put, any manipulation endeavour shall ascertain the need for a powerful communicator, a strong channel of distribution and a platform of reception that will be susceptible to believing the truthfulness of the message that will be confirmed and enforced through repetition, steadfastness and strength. This paper aims at uncovering the fact that political culture is not an innate natural vector of relevance but rather a plethora of factors implemented within a context of communicational authority and assertiveness via a powerful and efficient channel of communication. Individual identity and independent thought are often misrepresentations perpetrated by the mechanisms of personal hubris. In reality, a communicational approach, a sociological analysis shall explore people from the perspective of groups that are inextricably defined by age, gender, race, geographical positioning, religion or social status.

Keywords: *manipulation; communication; persuasion; strength; politics.*

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Interpreting Manipulation in the Process of Political Communication

The functionality of any manipulative communication act must be based mainly on the persuasive capacity of the manipulator/ political communicator working in congruence with the methodology of information transmission and there must be a concern with the level of comprehension related to the group identity or individual identity of the recipients. In other words, we need a powerful transmitter, an efficient method of transmission that reaches as many sources of reception as possible and a group that, if not already convinced of the veracity of the message, will eventually be persuaded through controlled arguments, insistence and exclusivity: The press can change citizens' electoral beliefs, can confirm and reinforce existing options, can induce new ideas, unidirectionally. Moreover, opinion leaders stimulate group loyalty, the social identity of ideational communities and the desire to maintain decisions made under pressure from group membership. Whatever option is adopted to strengthen the persuasive function of language, regardless of the intended system (transmitter-transmitter-receiver medium), language must involve a component not necessarily of coercion, but rather of overwhelming force to change or strengthen convictions.

The power of political language can be understood by defining speech through the analysis of language-in-use and refers to three possible approaches: "discourse as text, in the approach of formal linguistics; discourse as a conversation, in the sociological-empirical approach; discourse as power / knowledge, in the critical approach" (Aesher and Simpson, 1994: 940). Also, as a corollary of the relationship between language and power, we can detect the distinction between power in discourse and power behind discourse. If the first draws attention to discourse as a space where domination appears and relationships of power are staged, the second identifies the discourse itself as a target of domination and hegemony.

Political culture is not an innate phenomenon but a complexity of factors acquired in the context of communication hegemony achieved by a truly effective communication vector. The importance of the media and the Internet in manipulation, in political modelling and culture is therefore an indisputable truth. Individual identity is often an illusion built on the scaffolding of one's own selfishness. In reality, the communicative approach, sociological science targets groups according to age, sex, race, geographical positioning, religion or social status. No matter how independent we like to believe we are, we will function inexorably based on the parameters mentioned above. In the universe of communication, there is practically a vulnerability of reception of the individual who perceives himself to be a unique and original snowflake. In the universe of political communication, however, the reality is that the politician sees only piles of snow that need to be moved, melted or gathered according to pragmatic interests. If we accept this reality and have no reason not to, language manipulation is an indisputable reality and implicitly the sender of the message and the transmission channel (media) can create, change or reshape the political perspective, influencing not only electoral choices but also the behavioural pattern of people in everyday life.

The institutionalized manipulation of the word in the name of freedom, equating the political message regardless of structure or nature with collective deception or manipulation is regarded from a contextual standpoint: "In this context, when asked what can we do against manipulation? [...] To learn to decode, but also to learn to be non-influential beings, while remaining available to others, as well as to exercise individual responsibility, precepts that include the cooperation of a significant number of factors." (Breton, 2006: 9).

Alex Mucchielli's perspective is somewhat more temperate. The persuasive capacity of the word ceases to be an aggressive form of control exploring the sphere of contextual manipulation, if one no longer imposes a certain message on the recipients but rather tells them what they want to hear: "At the linguistic level, for example, the construction of exchanges (what the interlocutor means) is done, most of the time, by putting the communications in a context. On the other hand, by manipulating a set of clues, the speaker strives to show the context in which he would like the recipient to receive the message. Any act of language is therefore situated in a context of utterance, and it cannot be situated in a situation that exceeds the boundaries of conventional communication." (Mucchielli, 2003: 31)

We use the phrase political communication in order to integrate a wider spectrum of pragmatic processes through which politicians disseminate and formulate information to which they attach not only meaning but also control, deception and even manipulation, thus facilitating through this process an exercise in developing their own personal platforms of power. Political communication is in the first instance a set of procedures. A politician can propose a certain legislative initiative, but in order for it to become law, a series of collaboration mechanisms must be activated, including communication with the public. Poor communication can lead to the interference of a complex of opposition factors such as: negative public opinion, protests, drops in poll numbers or even criticism from internal and external partners. Political communication is based on the symbolic power of the message, on creating a language that people not only accept but embrace, the recipients of the message must be motivated and able to transform the abstract, theoretical dimension of language into concrete achievements, changes in life. daily. Politicians like John F. Kennedy, Margaret Thatcher, or Martin Luther King did not send a simple message, they used messages that inspired people, they generously offered charisma through every word, look, or handshake. They understood that the primary function of communication was described as "the practice of using language to motivate people to believe and hope about ideas they would not normally think of or implement." (Le Cheminant and Parrish, 2011: 42.)

Often, the hidden force of effective communication lies in the power of the symbols used. The symbol represents a structure of communication constituted by the convergence of ideal conceptualizations supported by the hope that ineffable things can be achieved through concrete actions. They are often abstract, attaching to the collective values of a community or country. A successful political campaign will always involve a rich offer of symbols, an abstract appeal to the communicative affectivity of the receiver. These symbols can trigger either positive or negative feelings, depending on the interest of the transmitter. Through symbols, communication can lead to feelings of brotherhood or conflicting frustrations.

In order to understand symbols and their capacity to influence and even control, we must deconstruct them, to explore the epistemology of their generation, thus heading, naturally, towards the sphere of linguistic competence. The generation of symbols will be done through a superior mastery of linguistics and semantics, through a deep understanding of the values of the receivers for which those symbols are assembled: "Linguistic competence explains the possibility for speakers of a natural language to construct, recognize and understand the correct sentences of that language, to interpret ambiguous sentences, to produce unique sentences. It is an internalization of grammar (explicitly or implicitly learned) that will allow the subject to make a judgment of

Interpreting Manipulation in the Process of Political Communication

grammar (correctness) and acceptability (semantics) on the messages transmitted.” (Rovența-Frumușani, 2012: 37)

Political communication is the ultimate weapon of any candidate in relation to his or her political enemies and the targeted voting public. Constantin Sălăvăstru paradoxically identifies the capacity of language, the ability of a simple act of communication to bring balance and peace within a society. Not only in the field of linguistics, but in any other field, the act of destruction is easily deductible and accessible to political players. Cultivating, however, a sense of creation, of empathetic compromise in order to produce convergence where there is divergence, is undoubtedly a superior function of political communication and communication in general: “It is becoming more and more insistent lately that the great battles can no longer be won on the battlefield - or exclusively on the battlefield - but in the field of efficient and productive negotiations - the space of action and discourse – producing agreement through mutual gains and concessions, allowing the parties involved to end dispute, conflict, and divergence of opinions. It is of paramount importance the fact that in the field of argumentation theory regarding the incorporation of a pragma-dialectical methods is able to determine certain theoretical and operational frameworks for the resolution of conflicts of opinion.” (Sălăvăstru, 2009: 11)

The voter must always be at the centre of political communication. The latter cannot be perceived or approached as an autarchic entity, independent of interrelationships or social commitments. The gregarious nature of man guides us to an orientation based on carefully calibrated group identities and stratifications. This deficiency in the implementation of an individual freedom turns humanity into a crowd, and the crowd is always predictable.

Since ancient times, the political message is built around the same paradigm: the crowd wants bread and circus. If a political discourse has unforeseen effects, whether positive or negative, we can say that this manifestation of chance is nothing but an immature form of dilettantism. Building a speech means making contingencies for the control of the masses.

The speculation of the flaws in the structuring of the communication strategy ends up turning into a civic vulnerability. Not only political enemies are meant to exploit the weakness but also the press and voters, be they independent or affiliated. The harsh sanctioning of discursive weaknesses practically becomes an act of linguistic evolution.

The efficiency of communication derives from the multi-layered complexity of the levels of comprehension through which it exercises its relevance. It covers a wide range of constituent elements, starting with superficial opinions and thoughts and ending with potentially decisive judgments on the need for national institutions and policies, ultimately enhancing control.

The greatest force triggered by political information is undoubtedly ethical assassination at the level of the collective mind. The debilitating compromise of a politician's credibility and reputation by building or deconstructing a certain type of image has in many cases led to the resignation of heads of state, such as Richard Nixon, or to a substantial weakening of their authority and credibility, like the Monica Lewinsky scandal, in which the American president Bill Clinton was involved, or the scandals that brought to the centre of attention the candidate for the presidency of America - Donald Trump and the recording in which he made dishonourable statements regarding women.

The rhetoric of political discourse often leads politicians in the direction of a language full of symbolism and manipulative charge. The transmission medium can be a positive one but also a negative one. Journalists, bloggers or so-called ground players of political parties have the real ability to elevate a mediocre political actor to the rank of sublime and genius or they can compromise a message, flooded with doubt, fear or malignant negativity. So, in our society, effective political communication simply does not mean ethically and pragmatically correct content for voters. The key to disseminating political communication is and will always be the ability to impose control. The natural message is often an illusion, a convergence of planning, selection and organization that not only influences but even controls public opinion. The desire for political communication becomes a systemic domination, a coagulation of camps aimed at taking over the absolute power of communication. If the rhetoric of political discourse often leads politicians in the direction of a language full of symbolism and manipulative load. The transmission medium can be a positive one but also a negative one. If information means power, then the camp that controls the information will come to have the political power and implicitly the administrative power at a regional, national or international level: “[...] I suppose that in any society, the production of discourse is equally controlled, selected, organized and redistributed through a number of procedures that have the role of conjuring its powers and dangers, to control its random event, to avoid its overwhelming, formidable materiality [...]. Although the speech does not seem to be a big deal, the prohibitions that affect it show very soon, very quickly its connections with desire and power. And there is nothing surprising in this regard: because the discourse - psychoanalysis has shown us - is not only what manifests (or hides) the desire; he is also the object of desire; and because the discourse - about which history always teaches us - is not only the one that translates the struggles and the systems of domination, but it is that something for which and through which the struggle goes: it is the very power that must be conquered.” (Foucault, 1981: 58-59)

An additional prerogative allocated to strengthening the functionality of the political communication act is very much related to the referential stability and the adaptation of the discourse according to the perception capacity of the receiver. Voters with a high level of education or belonging to a higher social class tend to become much more involved in the communication system, offering feedback on political communication, eloquently supporting their personal opinions and desires.

Communication in the political spectrum wears in this situation the coat of a dialogue, of an interaction between equal intellectual forces, the informed voter practically forces the candidate to formulate a speech as strongly anchored in indisputable realities, detached from transient manipulations or Machiavellian subterfuges.

The functionality of systematizing the veracity of political discourse intrinsically depends on the intellectual and sentimental equality between the transmitter and the receiver of the linguistic message. The imbalance between these discursive factors exposes or even irreparably compromises the genuine quality of truth and relevance in the relationship of information transmission. The location of the receiver at the level of the transmitter undoubtedly means freedom in the act of communicational interrelation. Being free in the perception and reception of discourse implies detachment from the conjunctural pressures of political manipulation.

The potential for manipulation is not exercised by mere intellectual or doctrinal imbalance between the receiver and the transmitter. Another strong situation of

Interpreting Manipulation in the Process of Political Communication

vulnerability is provided by the conscious assumption of manipulation. The receiver has sufficient intellectual training to easily reject the traps of manipulation, but for certain reasons (very poor financial situation, professional or social vulnerability) is forced to consciously and frustratingly accept the lies disseminated by the vector of political communication, if such manipulations come with the proverbial bottles of oil or bags of sugar or corn.

Through these vulnerabilities, the receiver relinquishes virtually any prerogative of independence and discursive integrity, ceding control to the detriment of the political communicator who thus becomes an abusive communication force, and the act of communication itself becomes a symbolic masquerade, a toxic and cheap manipulation aimed at the receiver, making that respective listener strongly and consistently vulnerable to this issue providing destabilization: “With regard to freedoms of action, we must recognize that political discourse benefits from an unprecedented problematic breadth within the perimeter of discursiveness, which gives it greater opportunities to influence the audience. When you can talk about any problem to influence an option and action of the receiver, then the choice of the issue is only its ability to more strongly influence a particular audience, when you can freely change the thematic register depending on the discursive context and increased possibilities of manipulation. to the public, then you really have at hand a magical tool for action on otherness. The freedom of political discourse is also manifested in the fact that this type of discourse facilitates what is not allowed in any other form of discursiveness: the possibility of manipulation.” (Sălăvăstru, 2009: 23.)

The enforcer of the phatic function of language is confirmed by the media communication platforms. Paradoxically, the development of communication channels has not produced an evolution in the involvement of the ordinary citizen in the political decision-making process. Shanto Iyengar deploras this contemporary state of affairs, of breaking the common citizen away from the concrete levers of socio-political power. He stated that: “the role of the citizen has devolved from the status of pawn or activist to the status of a mere spectator.” (Iyengar, 2004: 254). Indeed, we are no longer dealing with journalistic integrity or deontology, but with a media circus.

The multiplicity of communication platforms has produced a detachment of the common man from the systemic sources of power. Media channels bring forth illusory and false scenes, promote distribution areas for twisted ideologies and fragmented manipulations, fragmenting the collective mind, truncating the behavioural hypostases of adaptations of political ideologies, turning the confrontation of electoral ideas into a show that is often precarious, burdened by manipulation emptied of meaning: “Media channels are the main bridges to politics... and also the place where the political confrontations that often precede, shape or even determine the concrete or physical participation take place (in the event that this may even take place). moreover, those meetings take place in a panoply of media forms (books, magazines, newspapers, letters, billboards and advertisements, targeted messages, film, radio, e-mails, websites, blogs, socialization and of course television networks) and in many fictional or non-fictional courts... Such situations provide much more than just information about ideas, problems, political situations and policy makers. This constitutes our mental maps of the political and social world that exist outside the realm of our direct experience.” (Jones, 2010: 23)

The media is a complex mixture but it is very clearly delimited by communication factors based on manipulation and subjectivity, which are hidden behind

ideological mirages such as deontology or professional integrity. Media communication systems claim to be objective, but their very functional framework is based on issuing not at all impartial judgments of opinion, loaded with the not at all encouraging spectrum of hypocrisy. Journalists, in many situations, cease to be guarantees of balance and honesty in the distribution of truth, turning into provocative agents, discrediting factors that portray half-truths in an over-protected form of conflict journalism. What is encouraging, however, is that the formulation of these distorted views has clear limits associated with the seriousness of the information and entities analysed.

Small or medium forms of compromise in journalistic political communication are endemic phenomena, the subjectivism associated with these hypostases means pragmatic normalcy. In a healthy democracy, however, the compromise of the press stops at these two emerging strata. Regardless of the shareholding structure of a media trust and the implicit associations with one area or another of the political spectrum, serious transgressions, gross political slippages can no longer be swept under the rug the press. Building an analogy around the potential of the press to beautify the truth, we can say that it has the ability to hide under the powder of subjective lies certain bruises in the trunk of democratic expression, but cannot use these capricious practices of concealment to hide open fractures in a free and democratic society. Even if they tried to do so, they would run into the categorical refusal of the receiving masses, whether educated or uneducated, left or right, opposition or partisan.

The evolution of communication structures has brought with it not only a virtual integration of the population in the developed areas of the planet but also a globalization of the methodology of political communication and manipulation. The development of IT, in the context of globalization, has led to a standardization of the political marketing style, being copied or adapted, mainly the American style of making and leading a political campaign. We are not clearly talking about a step-by-step copy, we are still talking about masses of distinct people, but a strategic modelling based on the canon of North American political communication exists indisputably. The rest of the world has not simply borrowed political campaign strategies but even hired American strategists, the clearest example of which is the involvement of American political communication and consultation strategist Dick Morris in the election of Boris Yeltsin as president of Russia.

Political campaigns have become a global space for sharing communication resources, a huge technological network of cooperation in which communication geniuses have become the first true citizens of the planet, traveling without barriers and having a decisive impact on previously unknown social areas of expression. We cannot have a global political communication without a cultural globalization, and societies, although still seemingly different, have a strong universal common vein that belongs to the collective subconscious but especially to the aspirations and desideratum at a fundamental human level. From this standpoint, globalization has turned into not only an instrument for standardization but also a catalyst for communicational and political manipulation.

Undoubtedly, the economic, social, geographical and cultural realities will lead to the appearance of nuances in the expression of political information. In Western Europe, in countries such as the United Kingdom or France, more emphasis will be placed on fine-grained approaches, subtle references and the assumption of uplifting ideals. In Eastern European countries, such as Russia, a constant paradigm will be set according to which the political communicator must emanate power, clarity and decisive

Interpreting Manipulation in the Process of Political Communication

opinions, to be in fact not only the communicator but also the father of a nation. South America proposes a seemingly chaotic but still well-managed communication show, dependent more on emotional registers than on pragmatic or politico-economic notions. In Asia, the language of political campaigns is laconic, short and to the point, without too much interference from the emotional side.

Despite all these apparent diversities, the globalization of the political message and the related evolution of complementary technologies means that any idea and any concept can be expressed by anyone freely and uncensored through social networking platforms. Any individual, in any corner of the globe, regardless of opinions, can pass on political beliefs by creating an account on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, etc.

Political communication in the sphere of contemporary meaning, as a globalized concept, involves to a large extent a visible phenomenon of Americanization or Hollywoodization, of building elementary but effective archetypes in communication. The efficiency of this model also lies in the fact that it can be applied at any scale and adapted to any sociological category based on budgetary constraints and strategic conditionalities: “the development of political marketing inspired by North American commercial marketing methods requires the prescription of and compliance with recipes (tricks, deception) of communication erected in categorical imperatives. [...] Caring for effective communication (*ars bene dicendi*) is a consequence of the fact that discourse is a lever that is much easier to handle than budgetary, legal, etc. constraints. [...] Different ideologies do not use the same vocabulary; synonyms represent inexhaustible reserves of significance that allow the configuration of one's own political line, marked both ideologically and linguistically.” (Roventă-Frumușani, 2003: 9)

The force of influence within political communication can have a double impact, be it positive or negative. The use of this force exercise consists in the complementarity relationship established or stabilized between the communicator and the communication table. Charisma itself is under the rule of this chaotic dualism. The great enlightened communicators of our times, such as John F. Kennedy, Winston Churchill or Nelson Mandela, have used the power of their discourse to feed the progress of humanity, to bring a new era of peace, justice or social equity. Sadly, however, the dark charisma and evil power of discourse have cursed humanity with Hitler, Mussolini or Stalin, transgressing any ethical norm, turning the recipients of the message into indoctrinated beasts, leading almost all of humanity to social and moral dissolution. However, this reality does not belong exclusively to the 20th century. Abraham Lincoln himself led probably one of the most important communication battles in the history of humanity in his successful attempt to convince his compatriots of the moral and spiritual imperative that required the abolition of slavery and the promotion of equal rights for all citizens of the United States.

The political message can represent a dark pit of manipulation, but also the promise of triggering an evolutionary, revolutionary future at all relevant levels for society as a whole. Substantial change can only be built on a complex and comprehensive message. The science of communication will guide the entire energy of the election campaign to a message structure based on institutions, participatory democracy, interpersonal empowerment. However, the honest discursive side of political communication cannot be achieved without an unconditional assumption. However, the dark dimension of language and intentionality will play a very important role in politics. Lying and manipulation will be synonymous with the systemic inability to capriciously disseminate guilt to political opponents, to exploit mainly collective fears and

frustrations, to build a rhetoric that is always looking for an adversary or culprit who has nothing to do with the factual reality of the political situation: “The syntactic structure can also influence the argumentative orientation of the discourse either by emphasizing the agency (assuming the action by the political actors), or by depersonalizing the decision and exonerating the political actors. A formula with pseudo-agents such as “circumstances dictate tax increases” or “catastrophic legacy of previous government” is a common way of disclaiming responsibility. Nomination and passivation frequently appear in institutional, constitutional, but also “strategic electoral” texts for the suppression of the real agent and the transfer of responsibility (Girardian theory of the scapegoat that can coagulate the frustrations and anxieties of the masses at some point).” (Roventă-Frumușani, 2003: 10)

As an emotional impact, the negative side of political communication inevitably tends to strengthen at the level of the collective mind. The mere mention of the notion of politics triggers concepts of lying, manipulation or betrayal. Indeed, politics means concealing or misrepresenting the truth, but it is also the foundation of democracy. We cannot speak of a democratic system without the existence of a solid political system. Political communication clearly also means a lie, but it is also a factor of social progress, a distributor of painful truths. Political debate, excluding manipulation and lying, is synonymous with debating the strategy for the progress of a society. Controversy, contrasting ideas are signs of the health of a diversified society in terms of fulfilling the idea of a better future that can be built on the foundations of honest dialogue and not the pillars of distrust. Political manipulation can and must be rejected by true citizens who constantly strive to stay informed with respect to the democratic element that can shape their personal and collective lives. Information is, indeed, power and an informed citizen provides a powerful warranty that society will not succumb to demagoguery and lack of substance, ensuring the fact that the oldest institution of democracy, the Agora, will encourage and implement the encounter of free and informed minds who are able to reject extremism and deception with the purpose of embracing prosperity and freedom for society as a whole.

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Interpreting Manipulation in the Process of Political Communication

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