



***The Phenomenon of Public Opinion, the Problematic of the Concept, and  
the Issue of Measurement  
Critical Study***

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**Abstract:**

This paper seeks to raise questions more than finding answers, by continuing the ongoing discussion on the phenomenon of public opinion, where controversy continues regarding its concept and methods of measurement in the context in which it was produced and in the Arab-Islamic context in particular paragraphs .

**Keywords:** *Public opinion, Audience, Measurement, Media imaginary .*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

A number of studies agree that the phenomenon of public opinion is one of the most difficult phenomena to study, because it is intertwined with many concepts and terms from various sciences. This means the multiplicity of sources on which this term is based, and any attempt to study this phenomenon in isolation is a kind of deficiency and cognitive injustice. Moreover, this phenomenon still carries a lot of ambiguity, although the most prominent problems that those concerned with it have addressed are the problem of the concept and the issue of measurement. This is what Abd al-Rahman Azzi and Pierre Bourdieu focused on in their critique of the concept of public opinion, and before them Karl Popper, who pointed out that the voice of the people can only express a semi-consensus, meaning that the voice of the people is only part of the complete picture of the truth, or as he said: "Public opinion is nothing but a myth of consensus".

Media and communication research in the Arab world does not hesitate to adopt everything Western (al-Ayyadi, 2020) , especially when it comes to producing concepts and formulating terminology, which is applied to the phenomena studied in the Arab context. This is because theorizing in the West does not necessarily represent a paradigm that can be relied upon to explain the communicative and media phenomena that exist in the Arab and Islamic region, which inevitably confirms the crisis of intellectual and conceptual tools suffered by the Arab and Islamic mind alike.

With the increasing and expanding interest in audience measurement, we are now faced with a science that specializes in public opinion called "Demoscopia" Its measurements are associated with opinion polls in all fields, or what is known as "Sondomania" There are laboratories and centers that have made the phenomenon of public opinion their raw material to understand the intricacies and details of this phenomenon. Quantitative paradigms and their methodologies have been relied upon to interpret the trends, inclinations, and choices of the masses, as well as their opinion polls. However, what raises confusion is the credibility of the measurements produced, and whether we can actually trust their neutrality and the independence of those in charge.

This article primarily discusses the problematic concept of the public opinion phenomenon in both classical and digital environments, along with its measurements and the most important criticisms made by those concerned with this phenomenon. Accordingly, the following questions can be raised:

- What is the concept of the public opinion phenomenon in its classical and digital dimensions?
- What are the criticisms directed at the phenomenon and concept of public opinion?
- What is the concept of public opinion measurement in the context in which it originated and in the Arab context?

## **1. The phenomenon of public opinion, from the traditional to the digital concept**

### **1.1. Public opinion from a classical perspective**

The term "public opinion" in the Western context has been associated with numerous variables and discussions, most notably the decline of illiteracy, the development of education methods, and the participation of individuals and groups in societies in political life, believing that the latter is a path towards a more liberal life and the achievement of common people's gains. (Azzi AbdelRahman, 1990) This has led these groups to demand that their opinions be taken seriously and given due consideration in the media and political spheres, which establishes a form of power that can influence individuals, groups, institutions, minorities, and even states.

Despite the agreement of researchers from various disciplines on the importance of the phenomenon of public opinion - considering it an important preoccupation in academic circles initially, and considering it an element that cannot be overlooked in the political action equation, and its being a tool for social control, (Akef, 2004) and at the same time as a force pressuring governments to rectify and rationalize the actions and practices of their representatives, they - the researchers - held different points of view when embarking on providing precise definitions regarding the phenomenon, as it is difficult to observe or witness public opinion, in addition to the diverse backgrounds of the researchers that legitimize this difference.

Considering the most well-known definitions, public opinion represents the majority view, but can the majority view truly be reached? What are the tools used? This preoccupation opens the door to discussion about the tools and methodologies through which opinions are probed. Can we actually speak of serious, objective measurements that can be adopted and upon which decisions can be based?" (Al-Basayem, 2016)

In an article published in 1994, researcher Abdul-Rahman Azzi suggested reconsidering the concept of public opinion, both in academic writings and in journalistic language in general. This was with the aim of writing in a way that serves our Arab-Islamic context. He presented an alternative term called "media imaginary", taking into account the psychological and social state that is formed by the content the public is exposed to, as well as the background that the masses carry at the moment of receiving media content.

This proposition undoubtedly establishes the idea of independence from Western thought and its inherent theories, which have long been adopted in Arab studies and research without considering Islamic thought and its sciences as a filter to purify the impurities of ideas that may not be compatible with the nature of the studied phenomenon. There has been, and still is, a research desire to use Western methodologies, which reminds us of the Khaldunian article: "The vanquished is always enamored with the victor." (al-Ayyadi, 2020)

According to the researcher, the expression of the media imaginary reflects a pattern of perception that is in the process of formation, where it is difficult to determine its nature and stages of development. Historical memory intertwines within it in a distorted way due to years of decline and ignorance, which are remnants of the colonial phenomenon, along with attempts by the media to leap over history and reality, especially in Arab societies, reaching a history and reality that does not represent our present in any way. (Azzi AbdelRahman, 1990)

It is undeniable that Islamic thought included one of the fundamental concepts associated with the significance of what is termed public opinion and the relationship of this opinion with the political institution as a primary actor in the equation of producing and directing the masses, namely the concept of shura (consultation), (Azzi AbdelRahman, 1990) The latter represents a term that can be equated with public opinion in its Western definition. So why was the use of this term absent in Arab research and studies?

The concept of public opinion in English can be considered fundamentally contentious, but it is perhaps more accurately described as uncontested. In the United States, an aggregate concept of public opinion replaced other concepts during the mid-20th century.

The close connection between this assumed definition and Western democratic political institutions is evident in the term "opinion poll" itself, which simultaneously means "survey" and "elections". polls play an important role in political discourse in the United States because

of "the prevailing assumption that polls are the best way to measure public opinion" as they are tools of democracy that represent the views of everyone .

A number of scholarly viewpoints challenge the individualistic, aggregative concept of public opinion. Older frameworks of politics inspire some concepts; others draw from innovations in social and political theory. However, few studies have broadened the scope of their investigations to consider the public. The most prominent exception is the researcher Herbst, who explores the various ways Americans have defined public opinion.

She identified five key definitions from his interviews with ordinary American citizens: public opinion as aggregation, public opinion as majority dominance, public opinion as minority activism, public opinion as discursive consensus, and public opinion as the embodiment of elite discourse.

While most research on public opinion follows the aggregative concept, it is possible to find many scientific uses of the other four concepts in studies that have dealt with the West. Before exploring how these potential concepts can be translated into Arabic to conduct a survey of popular attitudes, we first look at these alternatives to the overall definition used in the academic literature to distinguish their meanings in English usage.

## **1.2 The public opinion and the attempt to coexist with the new pregnancy**

The digital environment has imposed its characteristics on many phenomena and actions, and the phenomenon of public opinion has found in the new medium factors of coexistence and continuity to appear to us in a different way, more developed, liberated, active, dynamic, and powerful, which has been termed 'electronic public opinion.' It is among the reflections of the accelerated use of new media, which has resulted in changes and transformations, especially in the oversight role, as one of the most important mechanisms for the people's oversight of states and governments.

The depth of the electronic public opinion's communicative activity also plays a role in shaping and directing opinions, whether consciously or unconsciously (Al-Lawati, 2022) in a way that makes it an authority that threatens the status and effectiveness of traditional media, as has clearly happened many times at the national, regional, and even global levels.

The process of copying and pasting all actions, formats, dealings, and entities in their traditional form to their digital form is still ongoing due to technological determinism. This constantly reminds us of the questioning about the possibility of applying theories produced in the traditional environment to communication phenomena in the new medium. For example, can we talk about a digital media imaginary for users within the digital environment?

This question may raise considerable doubt about the concept of electronic public opinion. Even with the complexities and ambiguities that characterize the digital environment, in addition to its dynamic, fluid, and flexible nature, it has been said that there is an 'electronic public opinion.' So how was this conclusion reached? Is it a continuation of spreading the illusion of the generality and prevalence of opinion? And is it even valid to produce this concept (electronic public opinion) in the first place?

The scientific reality of modernity has made shaping public opinion more difficult than ever before as the media's influence on the recipient is no longer the same, due to the latter's liberation, as they have become interactive and produce content, in addition to the emergence of new actors, most notably algorithms and artificial intelligence, which have turned the tables, as Salem Attia goes on to question, saying: "Can we talk about artificial intelligence leading public opinion? (Attia, 2022)

## **2. Public opinion and rethinking the concept:**

Among the criticisms that Abdul Rahman Azzi made about the concept of public opinion is that the latter carries many contradictions in its intellectual structure upon which it is founded and within which it is produced. Public opinion, he argues, does not refer to a specific social, geographical, or ethnic group... (Al-Qarni, 2022), but rather it reduces these mentioned groups, in their locations and objectives, into an imaginary mass that is assumed to exist at a time when we do not find anyone to establish it in the reality of the situation.

The phenomenon of public opinion has been associated with the content of mass media. The media, in turn, is closely linked and loyal, to varying degrees, to the ruling power. This means that the opinions conveyed to the public are merely what the state institutions want to establish in order to serve their interests. (Azzi AbdelRahman, 1990)

Moreover, the employment of the term 'public opinion' involves an indirect fallacy, as it implies that there is a prevailing public opinion among the people and that there is a great deal of consensus around the issue to be discussed, which necessarily distorts the reality of this opinion that is conveyed through mass media. Accordingly, any desire to examine the elements of opinion-making for the purpose of influencing it changes the reality of the prevailing opinion.

With the expansion of the boundaries of thinking about the phenomenon of public opinion towards the digital environment and the emergence of new media as an alternative to traditional media for shaping opinion, it has become imperative for us to think seriously and correctly about the new carrier of the phenomenon without neglecting the Arab and Islamic context, as was the case with the phenomenon in its classical form (al-Ayyadi, 2013).

On a professional level, the term "the Arab street" is commonly used, for example, in Arab media. It also refers to the idea of consensus or prevailing opinion. However, in reality, it is nothing but the opinion portrayed by correspondents' cameras and documented by their reports. This suggests that everything presented in the media increases the likelihood of consensus on the content presented, especially in issues of common concern.

The same applies to what users can document through their smart phones, the applications on them, and the accounts they own. These tools have proven, more than once, their effectiveness in disseminating content that undoubtedly expresses the opinions of their publishers or the entities they belong to. This significantly increases the rate and extent of the spread of an opinion on an issue, much more than what might be achieved through traditional media. Therefore, the latter has sought to adapt to the characteristics of social networks to reach the audience that has settled on them.

Through his in-depth analysis of the functions of opinion polls, Pierre Bourdieu started from three fundamental postulates that opinion polls involve: (Bourdieu, 1990)

The truth is that everyone, without exception, is capable of forming an opinion, as they are free and have their own viewpoint, even if they are not given the opportunity to express or have their opinion heard or published in the media. Opinion polls always overlook the silent majority and those who abstain from answering, as if they were suddenly regarded as deceased individuals incapable of voicing their thoughts. The matter is simply that there has been a prior agreement to disseminate the opinions that are intended to prevail.

The second assumption is that all opinions are equal and have the same value, and this is a figment of the imagination. This assumption reminds us of what the magic bullet theory assumes, regarding the issue that the masses are passive in their interaction and equal in their understanding of media content. This means equality in the opinions formed by a systematic propaganda.

Thirdly, posing the same question to all people establishes the idea of consensus on the topic at hand, even if there are options. This confirms the assertion that the formulation of questions is a form of guidance and framing towards a direction that serves the agenda of the questioner and those behind them. This brings to mind the epistemological difference between quantitative and qualitative research and the view of both approaches on scientific truth, between its multiplicity and singularity.

To clarify this proposition, it can be pointed out that opinion polls are criticized because they contain biased questions, (Bourdieu, 1990). These questions are often influenced by a particular entity, whether it be the polling center or the pollster themselves. Moreover, the questionnaire does not provide all possible suggestions, no matter how much effort the editor puts into it. Many options are overlooked in order to direct the opinion of the respondents. On the other

hand, a successful attempt at opinion polling can be achieved if we provide the appropriate means and tools for the society under measurement to express, produce, and publish their opinions. This proposition may suggest a degree of utopia.

In addition to the fact that all the topics to be measured in public measurement centers are linked to political interests, which necessarily directs the responses of the participants in the measurement processes who are basically inclined to the opinion intended to be explored, we can conclude that public measurements are a tool in the hands of politicians and influential figures that aims to spread the illusion of the existence of public opinion. Rather, it is fundamentally an attempt to disseminate one opinion at the expense of other opinions, which is planned in advance. Politicians often rally around the major issues that are published through the media, especially when it comes to major political events such as presidential and parliamentary elections and government transitions, as they are opinion leaders who have followers who believe in everything they say (Said, 2004)

Media outlets often publish what they call 'public opinion polls' on a certain issue, but this is, in fact, nothing more than an attempt to mask public opinion and a desire to present the opinion they want to be prevalent.

Pierre Bourdieu argues that public opinion does not exist, at least not in the way that those who have an interest in establishing and imposing its existence claim. Rather, there are opinions that are formed and opinions that are mobilized (BOURDIEU, 2006)(Loïc Wacquant, 2006), along with pressure groups gathered around a set of interests that are not explicitly declared. Public opinion, in its tacit acceptance by those who conduct polls or use their results, simply does not exist.

### **3. Public Opinion Measurement: Western and Arab Contexts**

The Enlightenment era made public opinion a social ruling power, as a tool for criticism and oversight. The general nature of opinion means the desire to break with the secrecy of decisions and public affairs, and thus the desire to access, understand, and participate in them. So that the public has the right to reveal, discuss, and even dispute its public interests, in other words, governance by all as stipulated in the Declaration of Human Rights.

Before the advent of opinion polls, it was often impossible to know the true state of public opinion except through political behavior. Analysts would try to deduce the general sentiments of the masses, and public opinion would later become synonymous with opinion polls, in contrast to what was known in the 19th century, which took the form of demonstrations, boycotts, riots, and strikes.

The importance of polling public opinion is widely recognized today. Indeed, it is sometimes argued that in mass societies, polls have also become an important medium for communicating ideas and beliefs, especially since many people have become less involved in community organizations and interest groups that formerly connected them to events and issues. Polling and Public Opinion examines the impact that polls have on the thoughts and behaviour of the public.

Perhaps the development of opinion polls on both sides of the Atlantic after World War II encouraged the assimilation of poll results and the establishment of the concept of public opinion measurement in France, the United States, and Britain. This dedication to believing in the results of public opinion measurements also indicates a neglect, as Blondiaux points out. This instrumental concept will lead to the impoverishment of theoretical research on the concept and measurement of public opinion. (d'Almeida, 2019)

What reinforces the West's belief in the reality of public opinion is the role of the media and the public's stance on the content broadcast through it, which is related to the public interest or the public themselves. The emergence of opinion polls has indeed transformed public opinion, which was a behavioral matter, into a phenomenon of arranging positions, which is based on extracting, organizing, and publishing opinions without the need for any action from the opinion holder himself. Accordingly, public opinion has been transformed from the property of the public to the property of individuals (Ginsberg, 2001)

Not far from numbers and facts, and with the passage of time, the principles that frame the public and guarantee the provision of their public needs through the media have been abandoned. Instead, there has been a shift towards manufacturing opinions, and public opinion polls have turned towards consumer issues, overcoming all ethical standards for the sake of material profit at the expense of values and principles

As is also prevalent in the West, influencing the public is done through lobby groups, (d'Almeida, 2019) where they are employed through the media, especially before elections or similar events, or issues that concern the public from time to time. The public sphere is never devoid of issues, where opinion is produced through the interaction between individuals in their social environment. However, it should be noted that the prevailing opinion does not last in the long term, and can be shaken by the media and social media platforms.

Despite research efforts, the term 'public' remained for a long time a political and cultural concept somewhat independent of the term 'masses,' until the advent of the press and radio, which established the relationship between the social and economic logic of the public, leading to modern audience measurements. However, the debate continues regarding the issue of finding other tools to understand the problems of communication." (Wolton, 2003)

In the Arab context, Arab states and their regimes have not been concerned with public opinion, (Boukhnoufa, 2004). This is because the regimes in these countries monopolize and control the media, in an attempt to practice unilateral propaganda to address the masses, and to shape their opinions and viewpoints. Moreover, Arab governments have not shown any serious interest in the opinions of their people. Rather, dissenting opinions have been suppressed on many occasions, even those that emerged through new media and whose owners have proven to be able to influence the opinions of their followers. This has led Arab governments to fabricate accusations against these critics of their policies on social media platforms and to prosecute them legally.

## **II. Conclusion:**

The intellectual deficiency has often led to a lack of understanding of the context in which communication phenomena, which are the subject of research and studies, exist each time (Al-Basayem, 2016). Perhaps this explains the failure to produce concepts that are appropriate to the nature of the Arab environment in terms of its academic research approach. This situation undoubtedly deepens the crisis of conceptual tools from which Arab research in media and communication suffers

Edgar Morin believes that understanding is both a means and an end of communication (Morin, 1998). Therefore, we must thoroughly understand the context before theorizing about it. This means reducing the distance between the researcher and the communicative phenomenon to the smallest possible distance.

The term "media imaginary", introduced by Abdul Rahman Azzi as an alternative to the term "public opinion", is more suitable for the Arab context. This is because it carries a connotation and specificity of the latter, with dimensions that differ from the Western context. Undoubtedly, it offers a solution to the theoretical difficulties associated with public opinion in the context of developing countries.

The concept of public opinion in Western countries is linked to communicative democracy, which is undoubtedly absent in developing Arab countries, whose political situations worsen year after year. This necessarily precludes the possibility of employing the terms and concepts that fall within the conceptual field of the word "democracy."

Attempts to measure public opinion often face the problem of the proper flow of information and data (Umayma, 2020), which would contribute to the formation of a real opinion free of misconceptions that may reach the recipient through the communication and

media channels to which they are exposed, whether through traditional media or new media. Moreover, the opinion of the Arab public, for example, will not appear in Arab or local media as long as it does not serve its policies, which certainly means the lack of independence of the media, the few measurement centers, and even the researchers working in them.

Benjamin Ginsberg points out that public opinion polls have betrayed the very concept of public opinion, betraying those who hold opinions, by attempting to manipulate and frame opinions, and then disseminating them according to an agenda that serves individuals, not the collective.

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