1999-11

Gauging the Media's Influence

Sedov, Leonid
Boston University Center for the Study of Conflict, Ideology, and Policy

http://hdl.handle.net/2144/3571

Boston University
Information and analysis disseminated by the mass media and modified or amplified by direct experience (such as conversations with family members, colleagues, and friends) can have a powerful effect on the public image of parties and politicians. So, with the campaign for the Duma well underway, it seems quite natural to investigate the extent to which voters rely on the mass media in forming their electoral preferences.

It should be noted right away that VTsIOM measurements have always indicated that the mass media constitute one of the few institutions that enjoy a significant level of public trust. The latest findings confirm this fact. In September 1999, a "face-to-face interview" survey of 2,409 subjects in 39 regions across the entire territory of Russia produced the following responses to the question:

- Very trustworthy: 25%
- Somewhat trustworthy: 44%
- Not trustworthy: 18%

Only the church and the army have comparable ratings. (1) Moreover, little internal distinction was made by the subjects among the different categories of the mass media. For example, in response to whether television and newspapers advance or impede Russia's development, the results were as follows:
As for political institutions, none of them - neither the president, nor the parliament, nor the government, and particularly not the parties and professional unions - captures a positive balance of responses to the question of trustworthiness. So, for instance, the percentage of people who don't trust the political organs is greater than the percentage of people who do trust them. According to our surveys, there are currently only two politicians who hold the trust of the Russian people: Former Prime Minister Yevgeni Primakov and the current premier, Vladimir Putin. Currently, trust in Primakov remains high, although it is declining somewhat, while the percentage of those who trust Putin is rising. Included in the category of those who trust the mass media least are members of the protest electorates of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) and Zhirinovsky voters, as well as those who do not plan to participate in the elections at all.

At the same time, our voters will admit only grudgingly that their opinions and decisions can be manipulated or even influenced at all. In response to the question: "Do you make your decision of whether to vote, and how to vote, entirely on your own, or do you also consider the opinions of others?," 80% of respondents answered "entirely on my own," while only 20% selected "considering the opinions of others." Of the "non-independent" voters, three-quarters were influenced by family and friends, and one-half (about 9% those polled) referred to television programs (7%) and newspapers (2%). It should be noted that the influence of newspapers is least weighty for the younger generation, for whom television reigns. Among Aleksander Lebed's supporters there is a significantly larger portion of people that name newspapers and opinions of relatives as influential sources than among other sections of the electorate.

However, a very different response is produced by a slightly modified question: "When you decide for which party or candidate you will vote, on what sources of information will
you rely the most?" This question, phrased in such a way as not to challenge the independence of the choice, but simply to establish the means of information upon which the subject relies most in making his/her independent decision, produced the following response:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources of Information</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central Television Channels</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversations with Friends, Relatives and Co-workers</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Newspapers</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Radio</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Television Channels</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting the Candidates</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Radio</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publicity Materials (fliers, posters, etc.)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Newspapers</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could Not Identify Sources</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Characteristically, local sources of information are referred to most often by those voters, who are less sure whether they will participate in the elections.

Eight percent of active members of the electorate, and 16% of the entire electorate, admitted that they do not watch relevant television shows and do not read the newspapers because they are not interested in politics. Another 12% declared that they do not watch or listen to programs concerned with elections and do not read the newspapers because, in principle, they do not trust the mass media. Interestingly, this distrust for the media is highest among educated persons who hold leading positions and rely on other, more exclusive sources, such as confidential information or rumors circulating in particular institutions, specialized publications and the like. Since some survey participants gave both responses, a total of 27% of those surveyed rejected the
mass media. (The percent is less than a simple sum because some participants answer both ways. Those people are counted only once.)

The nature of the mass media's influence can be seen from the answers to the question:

"What can you say about the role of television, newspapers, and radio on the eve of the elections?"

The media clarify the pre-election situation 22%
The media sources cause a reconsideration on how/if to vote 8% (2)
The media attract attention to the election 17%
The media confuse and hamper ability to make a decision 18%  
[includes 1.4% who did not believe the media]  
The media do not influence attention at all 11%

Thus, the overall impression leans slightly toward a positive or neutral evaluation of the activity of the mass media.

Comparing the levels of trust for the mass media and politicians is not an easy task. We received very different results in the rating of trust when we presented the subjects with a list of politicians rather than with an open-ended question. In the first case a very wide spectrum of politicians was offered: 7% answered that there are no politicians whom they trust, another 7% said they had no interest in politics and politicians, and 3% had difficulty expressing their attitude towards the list. Thus, a total of 17% could be considered to distrust all politicians, without exception. In response to an open-ended question, however, the level of distrust rises significantly: 28% said that they trust no one, and 14% had difficulty coming up with a name of anyone they did trust.

There are some interesting peculiarities concerning the mass media's influence on the electorate. The existing multiplicity of information sources does not permit the total
manipulation of the voters in favor of a certain politician or party. Characteristically, the voters, already disposed in their preferences, look for their favorite in the mass media. This is illustrated by the responses to the question: "Which politicians have captured your attention and stick in your memory with their actions and words in the last two weeks?" Most persons identified the politician they supported, with one exception - the less active and peripheral Krasnoyarsk governor, General Aleksander Lebed, yielded first place among his supporters to Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov.

Also, most interestingly, the premier, Vladimir Putin, who receives the most publicity and is usually at the center of events, did not lead in any of the electorates except those who have difficulty naming their party of choice. This, however, was enough for him to get the first place for visibility in September. In addition, none of the leaders received an absolute majority in his/her electorate in terms of visibility, and the electorates retain a certain elasticity, most distinctly in the case of "YABLOKO," in which 16% named their leader, Grigori Yavlinsky, and 11% named Putin.

It is, therefore, very difficult to determine to what extent the scandals developing in the mass media around the main participants in the pre-election struggle will influence the already-formed reputations of those politicians. Attacks and accusations of corruption have been leveled by a certain segment of the mass media against the head of the electoral bloc "Fatherland - All Russia," Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov. Since the beginning of the year, Luzhkov has been a leading presidential candidate and, together with Primakov, one of the few politicians with a positive balance of trust. It is unclear whether the influence of scandalous media coverage or other factors should be considered responsible for Luzhkov's falling approval rating as a presidential candidate (from 16% to 7% within the last two months), while his activity as the leader of his bloc received only 34% approval and 50% disapproval. At the same time, 7% considered the mass media's accusations against Luzhkov and his "family" (particularly his wife and brother-in-law) to be unfounded, and 17% were outraged by the behavior of the journalists and of the forces behind them; half of those interviewed are inclined to believe the information provided by the media and expressed outraged at Luzhkovs'
purported actions. The audience of the ORT channel, which has been the most aggressive towards Luzhkov, grew from 35% to 41% while the most critical, revealing programs were aired.

In Russia today few information organs remain independent. Almost all the media are influenced or controlled by an oligarchic group or governmental entity. The principal central newspapers and TV channels are divided among these groups, and carry on an information war. Meanwhile, the local media are generally very dependent on local leaders. This ensures a peculiar kind of pluralism, which tends to blur the lines of reality. Aware that the information is not objective, readers and viewers have great difficulties determining what to consider the truth, and what to discount as fiction. They are guided more by their own stereotypes and pre-existing impressions than by articulated political positions. Thus, for example, attacks against President Boris Yeltsin, whose popularity and support plummeted long ago, are most effective, even if the channels that run them are less powerful than those condemning Luzhkov. Two-thirds of those polled expressed outrage at the members of Yeltsin's family and the officials involved in money-laundering, while only 12% disapproved of the behavior of the journalists, and 6% feared that innocent people may suffer. It should be noted that 17% in the case of Yeltsin, and 25% in the case of Luzhkov, had trouble determining their opinion to the scandals, while 8% in both instances said that they pay no attention to the coverage.

In addition, wide sections of the population feel that the mass media should be controlled by the government, although most favor mixed control. This is demonstrated by the following chart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Government</th>
<th>Government and the private sector</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These are the various and somewhat raw facts concerning the issue of trust for the mass media and their influence on the electoral campaign. Clearly our surveys have produced some interesting but not entirely cohesive data. While the public seems to consult the mass media, it has very ambiguous judgments about the effectiveness and the reliability of the institution. The December elections will bring these factors into sharper relief and the VTsIOM plans to produce a more systematic analysis of the mass media's role in the campaign.

Notes:

1. This poll is conducted every six months, and the results have been relatively stable over time. The September data are as follows: army (25% very trustworthy, 30% somewhat trustworthy, 23% not trustworthy); Orthodox Church (35%, 20%, and 13%, respectively); parliament (7%, 38%, and 34%, respectively); and political parties (5%, 24%, and 37%, respectively).

2. Since both answers could be given simultaneously, this indicates that about 28% of those surveyed acknowledged the significant influence of the mass media.