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ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION IN ROMANIA: BETWEEN PERCEPTION AND REALITY

***Madalina HIDEG*[1]**

Abstract

In a consumerist society as ours, everything is relative, even scientific data. When studying data from different sources but on the same topic, one may find apparently unexplainable differences. For example, if one looks on data regarding the alcohol consumption in Romania, they may not know what to believe: is alcohol consumption a problem of our society, as well, or it is merely bad statistics, without any influence on the real life. The aim of this study is to prove that one must be very careful when reading data, regardless the sources, and they must not take for granted only one piece of information. If one looks into official statistics such as the ones from The World Health Organization, they will find that Romania is on the 5th rank in the world regarding alcohol consumption. But if one looks into opinion polls, they may think that Romania is a very lucky country and there is no problem at all with the alcohol consumption. We'll see that neither the statistics are accurate, due to the data aggregation methods that they use, nor the opinion polls reflect the whole truth because sometimes people lie when answering questions within opinion polls. This fact can be explained by looking deeper in the process of opinion formation, when people are influenced by the others from their community (and so we talk about social influence) or they are influenced at the very beginning when a message is being transmitted to them, especially through media means (and so we talk about mediology). Opinion polls data express rather majority and normative perceptions upon facts than a full range of realities.

Keywords: alcohol addiction, social influence, mediology, alcohol consumption, communication.

[1] Sociologist Freelancer, Cluj-Napoca, ROMANIA. E-mail: madalina.hideg@gmail.com

Introduction

Regarding alcohol consumption, data provided by official statistics (e.g., World Health Organization, The National Institute of Statistics) is different from data provided by opinion polls. There are several social theories that may explain these differences, which only make data from the statistics and opinion polls more relative, not completely invalid. The examples below speak for themselves. World Health Organization statistics show that Romania is on the fifth place in the world regarding the alcohol consumption, with 13.7 liters of pure alcohol per capita (15+), following Lithuania (18.2 liters), Belarus (16.4 liters), Republic of Moldavia (15.9 liters) and Russia (13.9 liters) and equal to Czech Republic. 13.7 liters of pure alcohol equals 685 beers, which means that every inhabitant aged over 15 drinks two beers daily. So, Romania seems to be quite on the top of the world's most fierce alcohol consumers.

But some national opinion polls (IRES, 2013) reveal that only 5% of Romanians drink beer every day, 18% drink beer several times a week, a quarter drink beer several times a month and almost one of five Romanians (18%) drink beer several times a year; surprisingly, three of ten Romanians say they never drink beer. Moreover, when asked about wine consumption, 7% declare they drink wine daily, 15% of Romanians say that they drink wine several times a week, one of five say they drink wine several times a month and 16% say they have wine only several times a year. Surprisingly again, four of ten Romanians say they never drink wine. Alcohol (other than beer and wine) is never consumed by more than half of the interviewees, while two of ten Romanians say they drink alcohol several times a year, one of ten admits having alcohol several times a month, 8% drink alcohol several times a week and only 3% say they have alcohol daily. So, the question is, if almost half of the adult population declares that they never drink alcohol, and then who drinks those 13.7 liters of pure alcohol per year.

Another data range supports the same idea. According to the National Institute of Statistics, every Romanian bought monthly, on average, 1,557 liters of alcoholic beverages (1.25 liters of beer, 0,246 liters of wine and 0,042 liters of *palinka* and natural brandy). Other opinion polls (IRES, 2017) show that four of ten Romanians say they never buy alcoholic beverages (the numbers are from a somehow indirect question - *how often do you use to buy the following products?* -, followed by a list of tested products – clothing, footwear, cleaning products, cosmetics, drugs, alcoholic beverages, non-alcoholic beverages, fruits and vegetables, other food, furniture, home decorations, cars, electronic devices and IT devices. Taking into account this wide and mixed list, without a certain context for alcohol consumption created before, the answers are expected to be more direct and sincere. Moreover, *never* as a response is option not usually read by the interview operator, but it comes spontaneous from the respondents themselves).

The same question as before rises at this point, too: if almost half of the Romanians aged over eighteen never buy alcoholic beverages, then who buys 1,557 liters of alcoholic beverages monthly? One may say that the comparisons

are not relevant because data doesn't use the same units. Data from the World Health Organization is collected from people aged over fifteen and data from the opinion polls is collected from people aged over eighteen; well, the population aged from fifteen to eighteen can't explain the whole difference between that data. If we were to talk about absolute numbers, those who declared that they never drink alcohol (wine, beer, or something else) are still many more than those who don't drink, as it results from the official statistics; the methods of data aggregation are different, but the differences between the results are still there.

Moreover, a study published by the national Public Health Office (Directia de Sanatate Publica, 2016) revealed that only 14.3% of the population aged over fifteen never drinks alcohol. In 2010, Romanians over fifteen consumed 14.4 liters of pure alcohol, among which 10,4 liters were registered consumption, with a raising tendency in the past years, and 4 liters were unregistered alcohol, with a stable tendency in the past years. Making an extrapolation of these results, one may say that the proportion between the registered and the non-registered alcohol is the same in the following years, as well, so that those who say they never buy alcohol are not exactly as many as those that are proven to consume non-registered alcohol.

All these findings drive to some assumptions: people lie when answering the opinion polls or a relatively small group of people consume a large amount of alcohol. The last fact can't be fully represented in opinion polls results, because opinion polls deal with majorities and not with minorities. The same study published by the national Public Health Office (Directia de Sanatate Publica, 2016) underlined that from those who declare themselves as alcohol consumers (85.7% from the population aged over fifteen), only 11.1% admit they have often episodes of unhealthy alcohol consumption; those 11.1% are not enough to explain the fifth place of Romania in the international top of the alcohol consumers (according to The World Health Organization). So, the attention will be focused on the first assumption, that differences between the official statistics and opinion polls data are due mainly to the fact that people lie when talking about alcohol consumption or buying and more, they are not fully aware of the negative effects of this unhealthy habit and they are in denial.

Lies in the public eyes

To sustain this last statement, let's take a look into more opinion polls. A national study (IRES, 2015) reveal that the addictions are not perceived as a problem of our country; people were asked to say whether they are concerned of some listed problems or not (yes/no question); they put the environment on the first rank (70%), then poverty and social exclusion (65%), uncertainty (64%), food risks (63%), road accidents (63%), unemployment (57%), climate change (56%) and chemical risks (51%); addictions (48%) were placed only before terrorism (47%), nuclear risk (46%) and the consequences of globalization (45%). People

tend to feel threatened by risks that are perceived to be closer to them and that may affect them immediately; placing the addictions at the end of the top of the perceived risks prove that they are not very much concerned about the risk of addictions and they don't think it is an imminent risk.

Even if the addictions were a problem of our country, the Romanians distrust the state ability to solve this problem. The same study of IRES (2015) show that only 32% of people trust the state ability to solve the problem of drugs consumption, 30% trust the state ability to solve the alcohol consumption and 28% trust the state ability to solve the problem of smoking among youngsters. It is contrasting to 51% of people that trust the state ability to solve the problem of road accidents, to 50% of people that trust the state ability to deal with terrorism and to more than 40% of people that trust the state ability to deal with the transportation of dangerous materials, with war, with nuclear power plant, forest fires, plain crushes, food products or radioactive waste. People don't perceive that addictions may be a state problem, as well, and not only an isolated individual one.

Surprisingly, not only the citizens think that their state is not responsible of dealing with addictions such as alcohol consumption, but the state itself is unaware of the fact that it should be concerned on this kind of addictions. Romania doesn't have any national strategy on prevention and intervention regarding alcohol consumption, although, for instance, we are on the first rank in Europe concerning deaths caused by alcohol consumption among women. In 2015, the Government released a decision (HG 160/2015) of creating The National Council for Coordination of Policies and Actions of Reducing the Damaging Alcohol Consumption in Romania, that should have functioned within the Health Ministry, but which has no activity so far.

All in all, people don't seem to be very much concerned about the alcohol consumption, they don't consider it as a problem at the society or state level. Moreover, the state itself doesn't think that its citizens have such a problem and it is not very much concerned about helping them to stay away of this kind of risks.

Sociological explanations for public lying

On the other hand, some theories on social influence (like social conformity and the influence of majority) may bring further explanations on the fact that people lie when answering the questions from the opinion polls. One makes little difference between alcohol consumption and excessive alcohol consumption; the alcohol consumption is opposed to general accepted group norms, and thus, it is not admitted for fear of social exclusion; more, terms as alcoholic, alcoholism, drunk are full of negative meanings. Groups tend to standardize the individual opinions on behalf of cohesion and they also speculate the individual ontological inner need of belonging to community. So, once people are aware of the general

opinion of their belonging group, they will not stand against it unless they are part of the counter-publics (Fraser, 1990) that threaten the social order.

Social influence

Let's have a thorough understanding of the impact of the social influence on opinion formation. The study on public opinion trapped within opinion polls follows two main directions (Geer, 2004): the sociological perspective (represented by Columbia University School) and the psychological perspective (represented by Michigan University School); at the beginning, they evolved separately, in a temporal succession, but they couldn't provide a comprehensive vision on public opinion. Together with experimental sociology (represented by Stanford University School – Smith, 2008), the socio-psychological studies on group cohesion and social influence explain how the group cohesion sustains the opinion uniformity; moreover, the strength of the group cohesion has similar consequences on social influence.

There is one more process that helps people shape their individual opinions, in the context of the consumerist society that we are all living in. This process consists of the individual predisposition of receiving meanings, once they are exposed to means of mass consent manufacturing such as television and internet. The identity of every historical time was shaped as a consequence of some social processes. Once it was created, the identity is kept, modified or transformed through social relations. These processes which are at the foundation of the social relations that they are mediating and which are involved in the creation or the preservation of the social identity are determined by the social structure (P. L. Berger & T. Luckmann, 2008). The structural reshapes of the society were always in a close relationship to the technical-scientific evolution: the first European industrial revolution from the XVIII-th century took place before the political revolutions from England, France, and USA. Values as democracy, equality, liberty, citizen rights emerged, while monarchic absolutism and despotism were abandoned. The nation-state and the concept of citizen were the great gains of that period, as they were the foundations of the modern societies. The television and the internet era were part of the last technological revolution. The mediation of giving and spreading the meanings builds the new social identity.

Mediology

The post-modern theories on communication talk about mediology, a concept created by Regis Debray which emerges whenever somebody links the symbolic corpus (religion, doctrine, school objects) to a collective form of organization (church, political party, school) and a technical system of communication (recordings, storage). According to the classic communication theories, the mediation takes place when the individual internalizes the meaning, but mediology stands up the idea that the mediation occurs quite on the earliest stages of message transmission, and media is one of the most important vehicles.

The more globalized the objects are, the more the individual becomes part of a tribe from the cultural and political point of view. The phenomenon identified by Debray may be explained by the argumentation provided by Lyotard (2002) regarding the non-conceptual communication: the non-conceptual communication is done through feeling that is unmediated and ontological. The concepts are nothing else but subjective choices filtered by reason; the ontological communication appeals to the social spirit and to the social identity that shaped the human being without its conscious will; the ontological communication does definitely not appeal to the individual values and ideas that one consciously adopted.

The social spirit is the creation of the ideologies that help the institutionalization of the social identity. The sphere of the institutionalization depends on the generality of the structures of relevance; the more common they are, the more the institutionalization is bigger (Berger & Luckmann, 2008), so the common knowledge increases, together with the common experiences that one may appeal to at some point.

People don't shape their own meanings anymore; they receive the meanings from the collective spirit that pre-exists. The individual predisposition of receiving meanings is some kind of meaning donation from a superior entity (such as *Sein* from the transcendental phenomenology of the German philosopher Heidegger). The donation takes place before any conceptualization. The new ways of communication appeal to emotions and not to reason. People never cease to find meanings, but the mechanisms are so much perverted, that they have the illusion of self-creating their own reality. In fact, they just take over already existing meanings and they decrypt the signs using not reason, but emotions. During their trial of making meanings, people internalize ideologically mediated representations which they anchor within their own consciousness. Ideologies are nothing else but necessary social illusions, a perverted image of the truth; ideologies don't resist over time, not because they are not true, but because they maintain some intentional structures of power or domination (Adorno, 2006). Ideologies are just fake consciousness that manifest through habits and dispositions, in behavioral patterns and in common social practices (Cooke, 2006). The analysis of the morphology of the ideologies involves identifying the structure of the ideas that create the meaning (Gillan, 2008). The ideologies are ubiquitous forms of thinking, which are produced by, turned to, consumed by groups and which serve as legitimizing, integration, socialization, simplification, orientation of actions. The elites produce the ideologies while the mass just adopts the ideologies through education and socialization (Oliver & Johnson, 2000). The socialization is one of the functions of the modern mass media. In this context, the manipulation is just the transformation of the ideologies produced by the elites that control the media into hegemonic ideologies.

The language typically constructs and mediates the ideologies, while the public discourse expresses them (Nafstaf, Carlquist, & Blakar, 2007). The identification of the ideologies of the mediation reduces to the identification of the discoursive elements that obsesively come back in the public space, in the context of the new technological transformations.

The discursive repetition of the idea of dissolution and of ending crawls the individual into the mental state of suggestiveness: the end of history (Fukuyama, 1992) (but only about one hundred years before, Berdiaev (1992) was talking about the first Man, the creation of the Good Demiurge in eight day), the end of marketing (Zygman, 2002), the end of the nation-state (as a consequence of globalization), the end of ideologies (Habermas, 2005). The entire world lives on the edge, and it is in imminent danger of falling *out of time* (Cioran, 2002). All the big entities are sick (time, space, gods and humans as well). The ontological disease of the post modern human being is the individual reality; the manifestations are not anchored in reality, so they don't really exist (Noica, 1997), but people perceive them as if they were. The television and the internet create the illusion of participation, that pervert the perception of reality.

To understand all this complex mechanism of signs decryption through emotions and of media perverting mediations, we'll take an example from our own mass media reality: on April 2017, the news channel Pro TV presented a campaign named 'The addiction of Romania: The Alcoholism – the disease in the glass', that aimed at raising the public awareness on the negative effects of abusive alcohol consumption. They presented their research on an episode from one of their investigation report series and during their main daily news program, several consecutive days. They talked, among other things, about how the addiction of a family member affects the whole family, not only the consumer, about how difficult it is to get rid of such addiction, about the negative consequences on the consumers themselves, about the lack of state involvement in prevention, treatment and rehabilitation, about the unregistered alcohol consumption and so on. Nothing wrong by now, except this: although they tried to interview people with different social and professional profiles, they somehow managed to interview more priests than any other category.

Maybe the priests were more willing to openly share their experience and publicly assume the fight against the drinking demons, or maybe they were chosen because they are informal, spiritual leaders in the communities where they perform, influencing the collective behavior. But there are other professional categories that are even more appreciated than priests. A national opinion poll (IRES, 2016) show that firemen are trusted by 9 of ten respondents, teachers are trusted by almost 8 of ten interviewees, workers are trusted by 76% of respondents; they are followed by surgeons (74%), sportsmen (74%) and journalists (54%). Only 51% of the Romanians declare they trust priests. Well, after watching this TV news, people may have concluded that priests are drunks. This is, of course, a wrong logical inference (when they generalize and extrapolate a particular case), but when emotion is used to mediate the sign/to internalize the message and not reason, the logical thinking doesn't matter anymore. The fact that perception goes beyond reality is already a truism. The effect was even stronger if one takes into account the fact that people consider the news program from Pro TV as being impartial (according to some opinion polls).

The perverted effects of mediation through media technology are reflected in the general perception on Church as institution. In 2017, it was for the first time

after 1989 when the trust in Church decreased below 50% in the top of trust in Romanian institutions (at the beginning of the 90', over 90% of people trusted Church). Of course, this episode of TV news was only a brick in this discrediting process. The media labeled the priests' garments with 'gay' or 'corruption' labels, exacerbating the public attention on isolated examples of gay or corrupted priests.

Taking into account the process of opinions formation and spread, the discrediting of a full category of opinion leaders such as priests creates a menace to the health of the society itself. Priests are main opinion leaders within micro-groups, who shape the opinion of those groups. The opinion leaders are individuals with coherent opinions, more sensitive than others to the group interests and more eager to say something about the important problems of the group (Lazarsfeld *et al.*, 2004). They are part of the informed and rational public which consists of 1% of the general public of a problem, in the middle of whom the consent emerges. Beyond the influence of the opinion leaders, the group opinions are influenced by the in-group interactions which strengthen the individual diffuse feelings. This is the so-called emergence or crystallization of opinion. The process of crystallization of opinions creates consistent group attitudes. The destruction of trust in a whole category of opinion leaders deprives the group of a part of its mechanisms, destabilizes the process of the cohesive opinion formation and consequently, it destabilizes the process of consent formation. No society can survive without successive moments of consent on public matters; otherwise it will be ruled by chaos. But the mob is more easily seduced than a cohesive group, so one may legitimately wonder whether this is a conscious action of certain elites in order to impose their will without fearing of public reluctance or even public revolts.

We'll take another example of how media perverts reality through its' mediation role: Pro TV channel broadcasts a comedy series named 'Las Fierbinti' (PRO TV). One of its main characters is Celentano, a middle-aged man with no stable income, who is always drunk, that one can't rely on when it comes to work, but he is a great life philosopher while drinking a beer with his friends, he is very optimistic, very creative and always willing to make money out of no work. This is another subtle idea that alcohol consumption makes no harm and it can transform people into nice characters, loved by their communities. But the reality is so different to this idyllic image: those who spend all their money only on drinks are heavy burdens on their communities, on the state and even on themselves.

Conclusions

Although they are different, data range from official statistics and those from opinion polls don't annihilate each other, but they become relative, as part of the same truth. The whole meaning can be gathered only if one minds to more than one way of interrogation of the immediate reality. No matter where they come from, numbers must be carefully interpreted and put in the right context.

Otherwise, one may be trapped in mediologic and ideological manipulations. Romanians aren't the Europe's greatest drunks, but at the same time, one can't say that Romania has no problem at all regarding the (excessive) alcohol consumption. When asked to express their opinion about a rather sensitive matter as addictions, people tend to rally on the perceived normative opinion of their belonging group for fear of social exclusion and due to processes of opinion formation.

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