

Reviewing Bourdieu's Critique of Opinion Polls and Notion of Reflexivity in the Public of Indonesia

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Abstract

In his writing, Bourdieu (1979) argued that public opinion that was measured in the simplified opinion polls or surveys, and were acknowledged only by the agent that made it, simply does not exist. But it does not necessarily mean he underestimated the construction of opinion polls, he also thought that opinion poll could still contribute to social science but it should be performed carefully. While Bourdieu might not explain the exact way to do this, he did come up with the suggestion of using reflexive attitude in social practice, especially in researches, to produce a more objective one. He introduced the notion of reflexivity as a way to overcome this question.

This paper will then link the notion of reflexivity with the concept of cybernetics, and in particular the use of blog as complement to evaluate public opinion resulted mainly from a simplified poll. An example of survey that was done in Indonesia is then used to analyze this argument to show that it is plausible that Bourdieu's argument still holds until present-day. While blog can come as a way for citizen to be an observer, its contribution to the sphere of democracy in Indonesia is arguably has not been properly attended.

Key word: Bourdieu, Opinion Polls, Notion of Reflexivity, Cybernetics, Blog, Public of Indonesia

Introduction

Public opinion had been described in different ways at a different time by separate parties, with some expectation that their definition will be accepted by all. Herbst (1998) suggests that the meaning of public opinion is “contingent” and the way we think about it and how we try to measure it is shaped by our social, technological and communication setting. But to assess public opinion is not an easy and simple task and prove to be the one of the most provoking and demanding aspects of democratic practice (Herbst 1998). This essay will focus more on how measuring public opinion with a certain methodology that is opinion polls or surveys is arguable. One of social scientist that had put more effort to question this particular method is Pierre Bourdieu. He argued the significance of using polls or survey to comprehend the opinion of public, which in that order could be considered as simply doesn't exist (Bourdieu 1979). This essay also suggests that this argument to some extent is still applicable in nowadays polls or surveys. In this essay, an opinion survey about Indonesia will be used as an example.

Another distinct characteristic of Bourdieu is his urgency to use the notion of reflexivity in social-science research. With linking this concept to cybernetics, this essay attempt to seek for example that can contribute to the effort of comprehending public opinion.

Bourdieu's Critique of Opinion Polls

Bourdieu (1979) questioned the method of using opinion polls to measure opinion public. But it does not necessarily mean he underestimate the construction of opinion polls, he also thinks that opinion poll can still contributes to social science but it should be precautionous and carefully done. Bourdieu criticizes the three implied postulates that were carried out by opinion polls, that is everyone can have an opinion, that all opinion carry out the same value, and there is a consensus about the problem. Opinion polls were also accused of providing biases in their formulated question, and Bourdieu somewhat agree with this (Bourdieu 1979).

Bourdieu sees that opinion polls assume that public opinion can be measure from any group of people, which would be similar to average all the opinion where in fact not all people share the same opinion, and the best way to display this product of pollster conception is with percentage. So by doing this there is actually a hidden system of force where the one who made the pollster seek legitimacy based on the result of the polls. He stated that “the fundamental effect of the opinion poll” is to create

“idea that a unanimous public opinion exist in order to legitimate a policy, and strengthen the relations of force upon which it is based or make it possible” (Bourdieu 1979, p. 125).

Opinion polls first postulate assume that everyone can have opinion, and this assumption is carried out through the process of making it with persistently ignoring the “no replies”, while Bourdieu argue that the “no replies” itself determine the question; was the question political or can be perceive as ethical, and type of people that were questioned, for example are they man or women (Bourdieu 1979). Significant number of people that refrain from answering political questions, the so called “non-responses”, has gender, age, educational level, profession, domicile, and political preference variability. Political science has noticed this, but there were no attempt to explain about it, and in the case of opinion polls pollster has tendency to just consider them as

regrettable (Bourdieu 1989, p. 398). Bourdieu then argue that if the no replies was considered as a category of answer as well then it is clear that giving an answer or a response to certain question in opinion polls is also just another category of answer, so to choose to answer or not is only a probability. Then the probability of answering or responding to a question also differ based on the category of responder or the category of the question or to be exact it differ based on the connection between these two. Man tends to have more dominance than women in this probability, so is the younger than the older, people living in big cities rather than rural area, and it is also increasing along with educational and economical capital, and social position in society. This whole process of opinion production gives impression that the more legitimate the questions are, those who are more “competent” are inclined and called upon to express their opinion, while those who feel there is no connection with them will be more likely to have no response for the questions. Bourdieu also showed that women respond more actively if the questions can be considered in ethical or moral way, and they are less inclined to answer for questions concerning political problem (Bourdieu 1989, pp. 399-402).

Bourdieu also argued that the capability of producing a response is based on what he called “political competence”, and it varied with the level of one’s education (Bourdieu 1979). He said that the greater one believe that they have the right to speak the more tended they are to response to a political question in questionnaires or polls, that is to agree or disagree or to choose one of the answers that were available. This right to speak emerges as one has importance or interests concerning the matter so their sense of rightful to speak about it also arisen (1989, p. 411). Bourdieu also argue that the merely act of questioning the same question concerning a problem that only a small number of people have interest about is very likely the same as creating something out of nothing, that it shouldn’t be exist. And it will lead to a process of giving out opinion from people that are incompetent, less educated, have no interest to ones that is more “competent”, more educated and feel that they have the right to talk. The main point that separates these two groups of people is their education level, so it is interesting to see that education, which is supposed to make certain the appropriate function of voting process by giving people the ability to be able to vote, in the end became factor that distinguish them even more (Bourdieu 1989, pp. 413-414).

Bourdieu also noted that opinion surveys can only describe people opinion in one particular time; which is not the actual time when an opinion is actually constructed. They do not depict the change of opinion, especially when a critical situation emerges. In such conditions people are driven to take sides, to join a formulated opinion, for many different reason, such as so that they are not excluded. Thus, there is no equality on everyone opinion, what they do is just adding individual opinion as one group, and this is why Bourdieu argued that it is groundless to believe that every opinion has the same value, just as what opinion polls presumed (Bourdieu 1979).

Now we will try to see the case of Indonesian public opinion. Indonesians scheduled to hold its parliamentary election in July 2009. Some news media has started to build up tendency to report matter concerning this lately. And this interest doesn’t just come from media agencies; some political organization also put some interest to this matter, just like newspaper conducted polls, they also conducted one as well. For an example in this essay, a survey concerning Indonesian public opinion that was done by The International Republican Institute (IRI) will be used. IRI, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization funded by The United States of America, was established in 1983 under the administration of President Ronald Reagan and its main aim is to enhance freedom and to promote democracy all around the world. The survey concentrates on Indonesian people’s judgment concerning Indonesia’s current political situation, how they conducted the

previous national election in 2004 and their tendency towards the upcoming national election in 2009. This survey was conducted on 19 May until 1 June 2008 by Polling Center based in Indonesia. As a sample, 2000 person that is and will be eligible to vote on the national Election Day in 2009 was interviewed personally. The number of people that were surveyed is divided equally with 50% are woman and 50% are man (The International Republican Institute 2008).

In the survey, as high as 85% percentage of people put economy in their top five choices as an important matter that government should handle. Based on study that were done by Herbst, members of legislative staffers freely admit that they usually use the opinion polls result when it will bring them some benefit, and tends to neglect them when the result was the other way around (Herbst 1998, p. 4). Then it is presumable that parties will try to make use of this surveys result to get the result that they want, which is to capture as many numbers as possible of people's vote, then it won't be surprised if issues about economy will be on the top of priority that parties will talked about in their campaigns.

We can see that in many questions that were asked to the interviewee, there were many "no replies" that were left unconsidered and unconcluded, in most of the results only most common responses are shown and in the last question the "no replies" were also omitted. So one point about the conducted of opinion polls that Bourdieu quite concerned about, that is the poor analysis of the "no replies" (Bourdieu 1979), is still happened in this survey.

In the question if there are two candidates campaigning for the same elected office with exactly the same qualifications, but one is a man and the other is a woman, which one would you be more likely to vote for, 52% reply that gender is not their main concern, while 34.4% said they prefer to vote for a men, and 9.6% prefer a woman. This question can be perceived both politically, concerning the probability of women to take role in political system, or just morally, just like how Bourdieu showed in his example on questions about education system (Bourdieu 1979, p. 126). But unfortunately, there is no further data on gender differentiation on people that answer this question, how many women answered that gender is not the main issue, were there any women who prefer to vote for man, and were they all women that prefer to vote for woman?

The same argument can also apply for the next question that is if there are two candidates campaigning for the same elected office, with exactly the same qualifications, but one is younger than 40 years old and the other is an older than 40, which one would you be more likely to vote for, here again the distribution of age of people that answer this question is not clearly stated. What happened here is just the aggregation of individual opinion to make these questions seem valid (Bourdieu 2004, p. 39). In one question, they ask responder to choose within a set of criteria which criteria that they will consider when they are selecting a presidential candidate, they gave this question to groups of people that replied they are going to vote in the previous question, but they also asked the same question to the people that still undecided whether to vote or not. They ignore the probability that these people may not want to vote at all, because it is not in their main interest, what they are interest in is what sort of person that people will vote for. This is another reason why Bourdieu argued the use of opinion polls, he criticizes

"the fact that the questions asked in an opinion survey are not the questions which are a real concern for the people questioned, and the responses are not interpreted in function of the problematic used by different categories of respondents in their actual reply. Thus the *dominant problematic*... is the problematic which essentially interest the people who had power and who consider themselves to be well informed about the means of organizing their political action." (Bourdieu 1979, p. 127)

And if we are wondering why this non-local organization have interest on the process of democracy in Indonesia then it is also an intriguing one, but it is difficult to do so without further research about this organization which is not the focus of this essay. But to presume about where their interest lies we can see from the fact that they particularly presented this survey to leaders of 34 Indonesian political parties that will compete against each other in the upcoming 2009 legislative elections (The International Republican Institute 2008), so just like Champagne refer that politicians are noticeably the preferable consumer of a pollster maker institution (Champagne 2004, p 71), then this time is no different. And they also stated that their focus of program in Indonesia is developing and strengthening Indonesia political party, to build constituent relations, and to instruct good governance, so it is quite clear that their main attention lies not on the public side, or at very least it is just if they need to know what sort of candidate public will vote for.

In brief Bourdieu (1979) said that public opinion, implicitly acknowledged by those who produce opinion polls or those who make use of the results of the opinion polls or survey, simply does not exist. Nevertheless, opinion poll or surveys is a measurement method that is most convincing and most used by public opinion expert (Herbst 1992) and to state that it is simply does not exist (Bourdieu 1979) would not make the process of understanding it easier, and it is unreasonable and more over impossible to just set it aside (Krippendorff 2005, p. 130). Even so Bourdieu argument about opinion polls measured by polls does not exist is nevertheless valid (Markstedt 2007). And regardless of the criticisms place upon Bourdieu work, more than two decades after his work has been published; researchers deal with opinion public research still use his concept as a reference (Champagne 2004; p. 64).

Notion of Reflexivity

If public opinion cannot be measured by simplistic and fabricated opinion polls, how then can they be comprehended? Is there better method to develop a more sophisticated product of opinion polls? Or even further, is there a better method to build a neutral and objective research of social practice? While Bourdieu may not explain the exact way to do this, he did come up with the suggestion of using reflexive attitude in social practice, especially in researches, to produce a more objective one (Swartz 1997). There are three things that researcher need to control in order to produce objective social research. First is, a researcher had to control the bias that comes when they are investigating an object because they carry their social and cultural origin with them. Second is, a researcher also has to realize their position in the field that they are situated (Bourdieu cited in Swartz 1997). And third, they have to overcome bias that came from what Bourdieu called as “intellectual bias” which is “a tendency for some agent ... to ‘abstract’ practices, and to see them as ideas to be contemplated, rather than problems to be solved”. He is assured that reflexivity; “the systematic exploration of the unthought categories of thought which delimit the thinkable and predetermine the thought” can apply to any fields of practice that allows it (Bourdieu cited in Webb, Schirato & Danahaer 2002).

The notion of reflexivity doesn't just attract Bourdieu; cyberneticians also put an interest in it. Cybernetics can be viewed as “a general theory of the regulation of systems” so it could also be considered as a general theory of reflexivity. In here reflexivity is understood as phenomenon when observer and the system they observed influence each other (Umpleby 2006, p. 5).

In first order of cybernetics, systems are controlled to be more effective, and so it paid particular attention in the concept of feedback, that is “information about the results of a process which is

used to change the process". In the second order, cybernetics paid more attention to the role of observer, which mean when one investigate a system one cannot help not to affect the system as well. For an example, a reliable news reporter inevitably will be subjective, because he or she will be influenced by his or her background. To construct authentic complicated news, one reporter won't be capable to collect all data and information, so it is better to work with other observers as well, because by doing so one can differentiate which part is one own view and which part is what was really happened (Becker, Slabosky, Umpleby 2006).

In the case of comprehending public opinion, we can consider the function of blogs. In the society that enabled blog, Kline (2005) argued that the line between an observer and a participant is diminishing or even more fading away, and with a diminishing line people can go pass it, so citizen can also be an observer. As Coleman (2005) imply, blog can come as an advanced and practical approach for citizen to communicate their opinion to the politician. Blog, as a medium of self-presentation, increase people independency to state their opinion. And other reasons why many people consider blog as an important source because blog offer a mean to express oneself without being controlled by the mainstream media. With blogs, politician and public can have a continuing connection in daily basis; it become sites where democratic interaction takes place (Coleman 2005). In general, blogs support democracy in three characteristics way. First, they provide people a medium to assert one own mind and to channel them publicly. It is in a private or familiar surrounding people usually able to say their opinion, and blogs provide an alternative method to express oneself without the necessity to come to a social gathering and state the word directly. Second, blogs allow people to express their thoughts and ideas incompletely. Third, blogs give opportunity for people who are suppressed, especially from less develop countries, to personally utter their statement and to be able to enter international debate (Coleman 2005).

In the case of upcoming election in Indonesia, many bloggers in Indonesia also share an opinion about it in their blogs. It may be as simple as three sentences to warn people to vote carefully in the upcoming election such as in Rarzi blog (Rarzi 2008), which can be interpreted in many ways, or a more critical one by Treespoting blog. Blogger Treespoting wrote a short review of property of three major parties that will be participating in the upcoming election from his own. He also critically criticized some candidates for the presidential election, and he also stated clearly that he won't vote (Treespoting 2008). We can argue that what opinion may be send through these two blogs are not paid attention in the survey that was recently done in Indonesia. While blogs may not act as a replacement of public opinion, as one cannot read just one or two blogs to comprehend public mood, nevertheless these two blogs able to show how one's opinion can be expressed freely and honestly, and just as Coleman said (2005, p. 278), "it is as channel of honest self-representation that blogs make their greatest contribution to democracy", so that it should be paid more attention to.

Nevertheless, in the case of Indonesia, blog as medium for politician to hear what public want to say hasn't been properly put interested to. It is also showed by how the currently Indonesian president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's blog (Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono 2008) has no space to accept people critiques and advises in his blog, except for them to be addressed to editorial staff. People can only do so with short messages by mobile phone or through letter, which nevertheless makes the content of it private and not publicly known, and there is also a possibility to be ignored.

Conclusion

Bourdieu (1979) argued that public opinion that was measured in the simplified opinion polls or surveys, and were acknowledged only by the agent that made it, simply does not exist. With the example of survey that was done in Indonesia it is plausible that his argument is still relevant. Reflexivity, which for Bourdieu could also mean a way to achieve a more objective social science (Bourdieu cited is Swartz 1997), can also describe the relation between observer and the system that they observed (Umpleby 2006). Blog can come as a way for citizen to be an observer, but its contribution to the sphere of democracy in Indonesia has not been properly attended.

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