



COLLECTIVE BEHAVIOR AND PUBLIC OPINION

Rapid Shifts in Opinion and Communication

Jaap van Ginneken

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Rapid Shifts in Opinion
and Communication

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Rapid Shifts in Opinion
and Communication

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2003

LAWRENCE ERLBAUM ASSOCIATES, PUBLISHERS
Mahwah, New Jersey

London

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2008.

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Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., Publishers
10 Industrial Avenue
Mahwah, New Jersey 07430

Cover design by Kathryn Houghtaling Lacey

¹Translation from the Dutch *Brein-bevingen – Snelle omslagen in opinie en communicatie*, published late 1999 by Boom, Amsterdam. Copyright rests with the author.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ginneken, Jaap van, 1943–

[Brein-bevingen. English]

Collective behavior and public opinion : rapid shifts in opinion and communication /
Jaap van Ginneken.

p. cm.

Translation of the author’s: *Brein-bevingen*.

Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

ISBN 0-8058-4386-8 (hc : alk. paper)

1. Public opinion. 2. Collective behavior. I. Title

HM1236 .G556 2002
303.3’8—dc21

2002019731
CIP

ISBN 1-4106-0731-3 Master e-book ISBN

Contents

Preface	ix
Introduction: A New Vision	xi
I MIND QUAKES	1
1 Public Opinion as a Complex Adaptive System (CAS)	3
Case Number One: The True Colors of Benetton	3
The Phenomenon of Public Opinion	8
The Metaprinciple of Complex Mutation	16
2 The Continuous Mutation of Informal Messages	25
Case Number Two: The Happy Disney Family	25
The Phenomenon of Hearsay	30
The Metaprinciple of Continuous Mutation	37
3 Circular Reaction in Media Hypes	47
Case Number Three: The Hunger for News	47
The Phenomenon of Media Hypes	54
The Metaprinciple of Circular Reaction	62

II EMERGING COLLECTIVE BEHAVIOR	73
4 The Formation of Synergy in Crowds	75
Case Number Four: The Moruroa Explosion	75
The Phenomenon of Psychological Crowds	82
The Metaprinciple of Synergy Formation	90
5 The Emergence of Patterns in Opinion Currents	98
Case Number Five: Hunting the Hunters	98
The Phenomenon of Opinion Currents	108
The Metaprinciple of Emerging Patterns	116
6 The Self-Organization of Social Movements	125
Case Number Six: Greenpeace Makes a Wave	125
The Phenomenon of Social Movements	130
The Metaprinciple of Self-Organization	139
III SHIFTING PUBLIC MOODS	149
7 The Evolving Context of Fashion and Fads	153
Case Number Seven: Pog-O-Mania	153
The Phenomenon of Fashion and Fads	157
The Metaprinciple of Evolving Contexts	163
8 Critical Thresholds in Fear and Panic	171
Case Number Eight: The Mad Cow Madness	171
The Phenomenon of Fear and Panic	177
The Metaprinciple of Critical Thresholds	186
9 Possible Attractors in Outrage and Protest	193
Case Number Nine: The Dumping of Shell	193
The Phenomenon of Outrage and Protest	199
The Metaprinciple of Possible Attractors	210
IV CONCLUSIONS	217
10 Phase Transitions in Crazes and Crashes	219
Case Number Ten: The Asian Meltdown	220
The Phenomenon of Crazes and Crashes	225
The Metaprinciple of Phase Transitions	232

11 Prediction, Planning, and Fundamental Uncertainty	242
Case Number Eleven: The Chernobyl Fallout 243	
The Phenomenon of Forecasting 250	
The Metaprinciple of Fundamental Uncertainty 258	
12 Epilogue: Issues Management?	267
References	275
Author Index	289
Subject Index	295
About the Author	301

Preface

*I could honestly title this book “What I wish I had known forty years ago.”
It is a book of ideas, observations and lessons learned, not a book of management techniques.*

—Richard Farson, American management consultant (Farson, p. 16)

Of all the prizes that come from surviving more than 50 years, the best is the freedom to be eccentric. What a joy to be able to explore the physical and mental bounds of existence in safety and comfort, without bothering whether I look or sound foolish.

—James Lovelock, British environmentalist (Lovelock, 1979, p. 3)

The first ideas for this book occurred to me some 10 years ago. After a prolonged absence, I had returned to take up lecturing again at Amsterdam University’s Baschwitz Institute for Collective Behavior Studies. Prodded on by its director, Professor Marten Brouwer, I had also (rather belatedly) completed my doctoral dissertation, on *Crowds, Psychology and Politics*. But I still felt ill at ease with the reductionist climate that prevailed in most relevant fields.

As a freelance writer and traveling reporter during the intermediary period, I had been confronted with strange distant cultures and with dramatic historical events, which seemed to challenge the standard research recipe: “To measure is to know, to know is to predict, to predict is to control.” So I was very interested when I heard through the media about a major revolution that was apparently unfolding in the natural sciences, around such notions as “chaos and order,” “complexity and simplicity,” emerging patterns

tions as “chaos and order,” “complexity and simplicity,” emerging patterns and self-organization, and nonlinear qualitative change. I soon realized that such approaches could somehow be made useful within my own fields; that is to say, generally, the sciences of man and society; more specifically, of opinion and communication studies, as well as mass psychology and collective behavior sociology.

These were years in which I also did some “popular science” and science information projects. After having completed a small book on persuasion and “behavior management” in everyday life, I now embarked on a small book about the exact opposite: unpredictable behavior in markets. But this obviously was only a first stab at the problem of chaos and complexity, so I soon began to look for time and money to delve more deeply into this subject. My small, part-time contract at the university at the time, and prevailing rules at research foundations, however, seemed to hold out little hope. I was therefore thoroughly grateful when Professor Giep Franzen convinced the Foundation for Scientific Research of Commercial Communication (SWOCC) to participate for 3 months, and Professor Jan van Cuilenburg convinced the Social Science Faculty to participate for another 3 months. The other year or so which the project took, spread over several years, came from my personal budget. I also thank a number of private clients that asked for my advice about sudden shifts in opinion and communication during these same years.

When I first began the project, only very few people in The Netherlands were interested in such alternative approaches, such as Goos Geursen (1993, 1994), Loet Leydesdorff (1993, 1997), and Arno Goudsmit (1998). My thanks go to a number of present and former colleagues who were willing to read various drafts in whole or in part: Connie de Boer, Hans van der Brug, Mark Deuze, Eric Haas, Jeroen Jansz, Peter Neijens, and Pieter van Strien; as well as to successive classes of graduate students who were confronted with complete and incomplete, coherent and incoherent, earlier “workbook” versions. It goes without saying that the responsibility for the present text is mine and mine alone, including possible imperfections and controversial statements. Comments and suggestions remain welcome, even after the publication of the book.

—Jaap van Ginneken, Amsterdam

Introduction: A New Vision

We must get away from the idea that serious work is restricted to “beating to death a well-defined problem in a narrow discipline, while broadly integrative thinking is relegated to cocktail parties.”

—Murray Gell-Mann, physicist and Nobel prize winner
(Coveney & Highfield, 1994, p. 8)

Non-scientists tend to think that science works by deduction. But actually science works mainly by metaphor. And what’s happening is that the kind of metaphors people have in mind are changing.

—Brian Arthur, economist (Waldrop, 1992, p. 327)

This book was published shortly after the dawn of the new millennium. The scare about a possible “millennium” problem occurred because many of the computerized systems on which we depend could not properly distinguish the year 2000 from the year 1900. It is a perfect illustration of the main claims made hereafter. Namely that minor details may cause dramatic shifts in many processes; from physical or technical to social or psychological. This observation does not square with prevalent thinking about the “controllability” (in principle) of almost anything. One of the fields in which “loss of control” has always been of prime importance is the twin one of “mass” psychology and “collective behavior” sociology. Yet this field has an uncertain status; so, in a way, this book is an attempt to revive the field. If someone is about to faint, one may shake him or her in order to bring about full consciousness. This is what I am going to try: to bring the field alive again by thoroughly stirring it, by trying to shift, broaden, and deepen it.

The shifting of the field entails the following: the studies of mass psychology and collective behavior sociology primarily concern crowds, and most of all, the derailment of crowds; for instance, in riots and panics. Second, and to a lesser degree, they include emerging social movements, and most of all, excesses of social movements; for instance, in splinter groups and sects. Third, and finally, other aspects of opinion currents and shifting public moods, such as fashion and fads are studied. This book reverses that order of priority. It is primarily about rapid, radical, and massive shifts in public opinion, and about the public perception of people and groups, products and issues.

The broadening of the twin fields in turn entails the following. Mass psychology and collective behavior sociology most of all tended to study all these phenomena within a social and political context. The last real revival of the twin disciplines took place in the 1970s, in reaction to the unrest of the 1960s. Yet throughout the 1980s and 1990s, other research themes came to the fore—such as economics and communication. Public relations people confidently proclaimed information and perception management, news and issues management. But it turned out that this management was not as easy as it seemed. This book will try to spell out why this is the case, and propose new approaches to rapid shifts.

The heart of the matter, therefore, lies in attempts to deepen our understanding of these phenomena. Theories in mass psychology and collective behavior sociology always had a kind of an ad hoc character. They meant to explain a mixed lot of anomalous events, which “ordinary” psychology and sociology were somehow unable to deal with properly. Similarly, the explanations were somewhat of a hodgepodge; they did shed some light on these curious occurrences, but often lacked an all-embracing view of broader organizing principles of reality and change. This is the main point this book tries to address, by suggesting a link-up with so-called “chaos and complexity” theory, a new development of the last 10 to 20 years.

Chaos and complexity theory originates from the natural sciences, but also hold a great potential for the sciences of man and society. Various scattered attempts at applying the new theoretical concepts to various problem areas have already been undertaken, but it remains a rather esoteric enterprise. Books have mostly been collections of conference papers, often written in highly abstract language for a rather small circle of initiated colleagues (see, e.g., Vallacher & Nowak, 1994; Robertson & Combs, 1995; Kiel & Elliot 1996; and Eve, Horsfall, & Lee, 1997). As far as I know, there are so far few books by one author that attempt to spell out in plain English and in an attractive format what the possible significance of these developments is for one appropriate, well-defined, and interesting field. Mass psychology and collective behavior sociology form such an appropriate field.

As a result of all these reflections, this book has achieved a somewhat hybrid format and addresses various audiences. First and foremost, it

means to be up to academic standards, but without unnecessary jargon and abstractions. Students in the sciences of man and society, at university level and in higher education, should be able to use it with good results. Second, the book also speaks to professionals in the opinion and communication fields. It must provide them with a new and provocative understanding of what their trades can and cannot accomplish. Third, and finally, I have also tried throughout to keep the book accessible and interesting for a wider educated audience. My previous work in science journalism and science information has given me the ambition to explain complicated things in a simple way. Some high-minded thinkers may feel that I occasionally carry this too far; so be it.

The out-of-the-ordinary form and contents of this book result from a combination of all the aforementioned considerations. It has more or less evolved into three books in one, a trilogy. The first book provides “thick” descriptions of a number of recent, dramatic cases of shifts in public opinion and perception. These cases are easiest to read. The second book provides an overview of relevant explanations of such phenomena in terms of current psychology and sociology; in a way, this is the “backbone.” But the third book tries to link this up with new metatheories about rapid shifts. This is slightly more abstract, although I have done my best to make it as concrete as possible. I could have placed these three books one after the other, but it would not have been very attractive or illuminating to read. I have therefore chosen to braid the three-level storylines into one. Every chapter begins with a case description, goes on to current analysis of the phenomena in question, and then a tentative link with new metatheories.

Let us briefly go over these three elements again. Every chapter begins with a section providing a case description. This is not unusual in management and marketing handbooks, and has even been done in some of the better known textbooks on collective behavior (such as the three editions of Turner & Killian; see Turner & Killian, 1987), but is somewhat unusual in other academic texts. I have allowed myself elaborate case descriptions, even longer than usual. Because this book is about complexity, the cases should not be reduced to a bare minimum, on the mere basis of elementary analytical profiles. That would have been too poor. These are often enigmatic phenomena, and it is good to develop a thorough “feel” for them, before moving on to the next layer.

There is also another reason, related to form. The latter part of the chapters often needs to veer off into somewhat abstract reasoning. It is good to have this preceded by some very concrete images. The case descriptions should function as a kind of “appetizer.” These fascinating stories, with a slightly ironic touch, should make the reader curious about the underlying “why and how.” In selecting the cases, I furthermore chose to ignore the collection of overly familiar examples in the existing literature, and to look

for newer, lively examples of a more recent date, easily recognizable, for a younger international audience. (The case stories are partly based on my own extensive clipping archives from papers of record such as the overseas American *International Herald Tribune*, the French *Le Monde* and the Dutch *NRC Handelsblad*, as well as on a limited number of monographs.)

The second section of each chapter takes these cases as a departure point, but inserts them into a wider category of similar phenomena, about the why and how of which there already is a respectable literature. I have tried to provide an overview of some of the major approaches, but with a clear preference for the type of dynamic and open-ended explanations that are central to this book; that is to say, approaches that view these phenomena as relatively spontaneous and self-structuring. This does not mean that they do not possess a definite logic. Quite the contrary; there are many tendencies that recur time and again. But they are not as readily measurable, predictable, and controllable as one would be tempted to think. They are highly erratic phenomena, which can take all kinds of surprising twists and turns.

The most emphatic reason to choose the “braid structure” of the chapters, however, lies in the nature of the new overarching metatheories about chaos and complexity, with which I try to link up in the third sections. The problem is that many of these theories are originally of a highly abstract nature, and do not square with the scientific reflexes to which we are most accustomed. This led to two choices. After a general introduction, I had to introduce these theories in a series of ten or so smaller steps of increasing difficulty, which would be easier to grasp. I also had to try and demonstrate these metaprinciples with concrete and recognizable examples from other fields, in order to anchor them back into our everyday experience; to show that the most prevalent “common sense” often overlooks obvious aspects of our daily environment.

I hope that in the course of this book it will become increasingly clear that these alternative processes do indeed play a key role in mass psychology and collective behavior sociology, in rapid shifts of public opinion and public perception. Another question is, of course, to what extent they do also apply to ordinary psychology and sociology, economics, political science, history, and current affairs. I have taken the liberty to shuttle back and forth between many domains, particularly in these third sections. It is not so much the examples themselves that count, but their demonstration of certain universal principles of rapid change. I mean to stir up a further reflection in the reader, not to “wrap it up” with final proof and an unassailable “model.”

Apart from that, I have organized these chapters three by three into four larger parts. Part I discusses the points of departure: the most relevant processes of opinion formation and communication; informal communication

processes as they play a role in everyday conversation and hearsay, in gossip and rumor, in urban legends, and urban folklore; formal communication processes, too, as they play a role in media hypes. These three phenomena are then linked to the new notion of “complex adaptive systems,” and to key processes therein, such as continuous mutation and feedback loops.

Part II is about phenomena on three different levels that have traditionally been studied within the twin fields of mass psychology and collective behavior sociology; that is to say, the levels of “visible” (physically assembled) masses, of “invisible” (or physically dispersed) masses, and of an intermediary category of masses that do occasionally and partially assemble—but need not necessarily; in other words, the levels of crowds, opinion currents, and social movements. What is typical about them is then linked to the meta-principle of “emergence” on three different levels: synergy, pattern formation, and self-organization. In a sense, this is the heart of the book, both for the phenomena in question and for the metaprinciples invoked.

Part III is a further elaboration of all this. It focuses on the three prime forms of “emotional coloring” of opinion currents and public moods; namely, euphoric moods (as they prevail in fashion and fads), fearful moods (as they surround panic and scares), and hostile moods (as they dominate outrage and protest). These are then used to demonstrate some further relevant metaprinciples: those of evolving contexts, critical thresholds, and possible attractors. The latter notion refers to the fact that although these processes may be hard to measure, predict, and control, they may still somehow follow a kind of inherent global logic.

Part IV draws further conclusions. It begins with a discussion of a combination of some of the aforementioned phenomena: successive crazes and crashes in financial markets. In this context, the metaprinciple of “phase transitions” is introduced. Finally, we look at the question of why technological and economic, social and opinion forecasts do often fail so miserably. At the end of the book, this brings us to the metaprinciple of all metaprinciples: that of fundamental uncertainty. We spell out once again why many complex phenomena entail sudden surprises, and what this implies for science and management, including so-called information and perception management, news and issues management.

In sum, the central question of this theoretical investigation is the following. Do the new notions of chaos and complexity point to alternative ways of conceptualizing rapid, radical, and massive shifts in public opinion and perception? What can they contribute to the sciences of man and society in general, and to mass psychology and collective behavior sociology in particular?

Note. The reader who is extremely pressed for time may choose to skip the third part at first. As already indicated, it is a further elaboration and refinement of the major themes; the overall argument can well be followed on the basis of the other parts alone.

I

MIND QUAKES

Only fools, liars and charlatans predict earthquakes.
—Charles Richter, American seismologist (see Sherden, 1998, p. 259)

The preface has explained how this book came about, the introduction, how it is organized. We now come to Part I and the first three chapters, which acquaint the reader with some of the major starting points. We begin with a general outline of the approach, which will gradually be filled in. Not all questions can be answered right away, some will have to wait until the book and the argument have proceeded somewhat further. Because this approach is at variance with more familiar ones, it may take some time and patience before it “catches on” in the reader’s mind, and before all the implications begin to unfold.

Like subsequent ones, the first three chapters all consist of three sections, which represent three levels of the argument: from concrete to abstract. The last and most abstract level is that of some relevant metaprinciple. In this part, they are the general metaprinciple of complex adaptive systems, and the more specific metaprinciples of continuous mutation and feedback loops. They have sometimes been identified in the past, but only sketchily. It now turns out that they play an essential role in almost any field: ranging from physics, chemistry, and biology to psychology, sociology, and economics. This volume tries to understand how they help put questions of accelerated change in different terms.

Thus the second and central sections of these three chapters look at some of the main subjects of this whole book: collective opinion formation, the shifting public perception of products and brands, institutions and is-

sues, and their “emotional coloring.” This is followed by a closer look at some of the communication processes involved (informal communication processes, such as those involved in everyday conversation, in hearsay, gossip, and rumor, in which messages change all the time; and formal communication processes, such as those involved in media hypes, in which messages are boosted by “circular reaction”). These few basic elements then enable us to proceed further.

Public Opinion as a Complex Adaptive System (CAS)

The certainties of one age are the problems of the next.

—R. H. Tawney, British historian (Gross, 1987, p. 321)

The true test of a brilliant theory [is that] what first is thought to be wrong is later shown to be obvious.

—Assar Lindbeck, Nobel Prize Committee
(Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1991, p. 3)

The first section of this first chapter probes the case of Benetton, which acquired worldwide renown and notoriety, through the “3C” rock star strategy of continually courting controversy. By turning the Benetton brand into an issue, into a matter of recurrent reporting and conversation, it succeeded in boosting its visibility and recognizability from zero to close to 100%. In order to see how this works, we use the second section to delve somewhat deeper into the phenomenon of public opinion in general, which is often treated as if it were the mere sum of individual opinions of relative stability. Rather, it should be approached as a dynamic configuration in constant transformation. In the third section, this is further explored by taking a closer look at the newly discovered metaprinciples of complex adaptive systems. Within this framework, it becomes understandable how immeasurably small details may provoke dramatic turnarounds.

CASE NUMBER ONE: THE TRUE COLORS OF BENETTON

Let us take a look at a relatively recent controversy in public opinion, or rather a string of controversies, about a brand. It catapulted the brand into

the front ranks of world renown and notoriety, for better and for worse. It happened through a series of tremors. We later encounter other examples, where one mighty earthquake made public opinion shift from positive to negative, from sympathy to antipathy.

The story of the Benetton family is a classic “rags to riches” tale. The father was a simple bicycle repairman. After he died (around the end of World War II), the older children were forced to leave school early and try to make a living. The eldest, Luciano, became a ready-to-wear salesman; his sister, Giuliana, went to work in a ready-to-wear workshop. Ten years later, they set out on their own. Luciano made the rounds on his motorbike to sell what they produced. Giuliana used a knitting machine, on which she made colorful sweaters. Ten years later, they decided to change the label from the bland, French brand name, *Très Jolie*, into their own characteristic Italian family name, Benetton, and embarked on one of the major entrepreneurial success stories of our time. Gradually, the younger brothers Gilberto and Carlo joined the business as well (Moskowitz, 1987).

The success of the company was based on a unique configuration of factors. Style: They thrived on the long-term evolution from drab to vivid colors and patterns, natural fabrics, the emergence of casual youth, leisure, and sportswear. Production: They had a key part made on ultramodern machinery, and another part made by archaic subcontracting methods. This enabled them to maintain competitive prices, while at the same time circumventing employment rules and labor unions. Distribution: They developed a franchise formula, whereby shopkeepers put up the money, bought a fixed interior (and exterior) design, and a changing seasonal collection. Trends: The outlet PCs all came to be connected to a central computer system, which directed Benettions undyed sweaters to be instantaneously finished in the fashion color of the day for any region of the world, and to be airlifted there (van Niekerk, 1993).

By the late 1960s, they already had some 300 shops throughout Italy and opened their first shop in Paris. By the late 1970s, they already had almost 300 shops in France, hundreds elsewhere in Europe, and opened their first shop in New York. By the late 1980s, they had hundreds of shops in North America and some 5,000 worldwide. But they also ran into overexpansion problems. Whereas sales continued to rise, profits stagnated for the first time in 1988, and even fell in 1989. They launched minority shares, but this was not entirely successful. They tried to diversify, but had to make a U-turn back to their main business—fashion. Finally, Luciano Benetton and his family decided that they could restore profitability by having more of an “image.”

For a few years, they worked with Oliviero Toscani. His father had been a long-time press photographer at the daily, *Corriere della Sera*. He himself

had gone to art school in Zürich, Switzerland, and had in turn become a well-known fashion photographer, working for magazines such as *Donna*, *Moda*, and *Vogue*. He was very much a provocateur, in tune with the spirit of the times (Toscani, 1995).

After “Jesus Christ Superstar” had become a popular musical, a friend of his had launched a new brand of “Jesus” jeans, and Toscani had developed a promotion campaign of controversial images and texts. Predictably, they were attacked by the Vatican and their official newspaper, the *Osservatore Romano*. Later, when they criticized Toscani and his advertising agency of stamping the Benetton logo on all the misery of the world, and thereby exploiting it, he retorted without blushing by observing that this was exactly what Christ, his disciples, and the Church had done with the crucifix for almost 2,000 years. The Bible was an accumulation of unsettling stories and images, he said, no different from his own campaigns.

Later, Toscani had done the well-received “Real People” campaign for the new American fashion brand, Esprit. It portrayed ordinary people picked from the streets in their casual wear, rather than sterile super models. He also did a campaign for the new Italian fashion brand, Fiorucci, part of which was later bought by the Benetton family. That is how Toscani got to work for them as well. Until the late 1980s, Toscani’s Benetton campaigns had been noteworthy, but not revolutionary. They portrayed lively youngsters—alone, in couples, or in groups—in vividly colored knitwear. From 1989 on, however, they developed a new focus.

On one hand, they had gradually shifted to a new name and logo in a green quadrangle, “United Colors of Benetton.” This was vaguely reminiscent of the United States, the United Nations, and some kind of “global village,” or melting pot. On the other hand, they had gradually shifted to matching new visual themes; bridging differences in national colors, skin colors, and so forth. It turned out this sparked recurrent controversies, which obviously served their purpose very well. The strategy was based on several elements: graphic and archetypal images, which could alternately be taken to confirm or disclaim stereotypes; toying with manifold possible interpretations by choosing never to “anchor” a simple meaning for the image in an explanatory by-line. There would be a contrasting reception of the images by different social groups due to cultural diversity, which would automatically stir up a debate.

There had been some minor controversy when they began by displaying the national flags of “opposite” countries. When Gorbachev visited Paris at the end of the Cold War, Benetton lined the entire Champs Elysées boulevard with posters featuring kissing Black twins clad in Soviet and American flags. Similar campaigns were based on the Greek and Turkish flags, the British and the Argentinian flags, the German and the Israeli flags. These de-

pictions encountered fierce opposition; the first complaints: the media refused to print them, discussions were held at regulatory bodies, and there were problems with government restrictions imposed.

The campaign went into higher gear with a Black woman presenting a bare breast to a white baby. The ad was forbidden by the White minority in South Africa, and criticized by a Black minority in North America. The theme was further developed with a Black and a White hand tied by handcuffs, a Black adult hand and a White baby hand, Black and White toddlers with “devils horns” and an “angel curls” hairdo, Black and White toddlers kissing, on a potty, sticking their tongues out, and so on. In retrospect, it seems surprising that many of these apparently innocent posters stirred controversy and “free publicity” at all. But Toscani and Benetton had to continue to push the limits in order to keep the attention.

By the early 1990s, they chose a complete revolution in advertising strategy. On one hand, they would give up the visual theme of “united colors,” and thereby all direct references to the product itself. On the other hand, they would simply focus on humanitarian subjects, with press photographs selected and acquired for that purpose. These were pictures about Mafia terror and Mafia victims in Italy, about civil and military violence, about refugees and poverty. Earlier, at the outbreak of the Gulf conflict, they had published pictures of a war cemetery. Later, when the Yugoslav conflict persisted, they published pictures of bloodstained clothes of a known soldier killed in the fighting. Although many protested against these pictures, a small Sarajevo agency asked Benetton to send thousands of free copies of such posters to line the streets of the Bosnian capital, and Benetton complied.

Most controversial of all were the “safe sex” and AIDS campaigns. Early forerunners were a poster with colored condoms, and another one featured test tubes with the first names of major political figures of the day: Yasser, Helmut, George, Mikhael, and Moammar. In 1992, Benetton gave worldwide exposure to a press picture of dying AIDS activist, David Kirby, surrounded and supported by his family. The latter condoned both the original publication of the pictures in *Life* magazine, and their later recirculation by Benetton. The chosen picture had earned its author several awards, and even a second prize at the World Press Photo competition. Yet its public exhibition as part of an advertising campaign stirred many protests, for instance, by the Catholic Church.

Toscani countered that it should be seen as the present-day equivalent of Michelangelo’s famous Pietà sculpture. For once, it showed an AIDS victim supported by a caring family, rather than abandoned as a pestilent outcast. Philippe Ariès’s famous study on *La mort et l’Occident* had already shown, he added, that death and its images had become a taboo subject

throughout the West. Only on very few occasions had major Western media ever dared to show AIDS victims (or cancer victims, for that matter).

Others referred to the essays of Susan Sontag on “Illness as Metaphor” and “On Photography” to account for the strong reaction. The format of the picture, they said, reminded one of an intimate family snapshot, which was suddenly exposed to the impudent eyes of the public (van Niekerk, 1993, pp. 45–54). During a trip to the United States, Toscani saw a local television report about a row, when a student had come to the college gates, dressed in no more than a tattoo, “HIV Positive.” This inspired another controversial picture and campaign.

Throughout the 1990s, the Benetton campaigns continued to divide people. No campaigns were more often denounced as immoral, or more often acclaimed as innovative. The critics repeated that advertising space should be filled with positive and uplifting images, that filling it with these negative and depressing images was confrontational, and amounted to a cynical exploitation of conflict, death, and sex for personal gain. The supporters repeated that the campaigns broke down artificial barriers, that most mass media were commercial anyway, and that there was no a priori reason why the huge budgets and space reserved for advertising could not be used to make people think about social problems. But they acknowledged that within 6 years, its strategy of thriving on controversy had propelled Benetton into one of the best-known brands in the world.

The Benetton case is particularly interesting and relevant, because it illustrates a number of complex processes that we elaborate on in the course of this book. Even though it was not so much an example of one singular, rapid, radical, and massive shift, but rather of a succession of smaller ones, which ultimately led to the creation of a new and compelling brand image. This thorough mutation was fed and sustained by ever-new debates. There were feedback loops and media hypes, there was synergy formation, and an emerging pattern. In a way it was a twin pattern, a split image, a dual public—of proponents and opponents—with few people remaining indifferent.

The campaigns were both clear-cut and ambivalent; they resonated with the deepest hopes and fears of each individual, and also with feelings of admiration and loathing. They had their social effect in a very specific set of circumstances. There have been many attempts to repeat the feat, but these attempts had much less impact. There was no guarantee at the outset that this approach would work, and there is no guarantee that it will continue to work. There is something profoundly immeasurable, unpredictable, and uncontrollable about public opinion. Rather than a stable aggregate, it should be seen as a dynamic configuration; or even a complex adaptive system. Let us take a closer look at what this implies.

THE PHENOMENON OF PUBLIC OPINION

Within a few years time, Benetton had succeeded in turning an unknown and bland fashion brand into one of the best-known and most forceful brands in the world. It succeeded, because photographer Oliviero Toscani intuitively exploited the laws of opinion formation. He provoked recurrent controversies and thereby created “issues” that stirred the media and the public over and over again to take sides. In order to understand this, we must take a closer look at the functioning of public opinion. Public opinion is not the static sum of individual opinions, but a dynamic process, which continually evolves new and shifting patterns. This section sketches some basic principles, which will be further refined in the course of the book.

Of course the first question must be what public opinion really is. By the time the notion had become broadly used, a handbook identified more than 50 different definitions (Childs, 1965). Let us therefore start from the words themselves. First of all, public opinion is about opinions, not about statements of fact. It is an opinion or value judgment about which people are divided.

Secondly, public opinion is “public.” It does not refer to private opinions, which people may hold but keep to themselves. Public opinion is about opinions that people make public and express. Or, as Noelle-Neumann (1994) put it, it is “a social psychological process lending cohesion to human communities . . . a process in which agreement about the values of the community and the acts derived therefrom is continuously reestablished” (p. 98). According to this definition, public opinion is a key process in the formation, reformation (and dissolution) of groups. What is it that people want to identify with, belong to? And what is it that they do not?

Public Opinion and Opinion Polls

The notion of public opinion has a long and varied history. It was always related to some kind of public debate, in which a number of free citizens spoke out, to reach some kind of common understanding about public questions. During Greek and Roman antiquity, and in southern Europe, this was often related to outdoor meeting places such as markets and squares—the forum. During the Enlightenment, and in northern Europe, it was often related to new indoor meeting places such as the coffee houses in larger English cities, the salons in France, and the *Tischgesellschaften* in the German language area. Within these relatively open environments, new groups, new aspirations, and new ideas came to the fore; for instance, regarding further restrictions on the powers of the absolute monarch, and extensions of the powers of people’s representatives in deliberative

assemblies or parliaments, claiming to represent popular sovereignty and the general will (Lippmann, 1947).

Yet this public opinion of the late 18th and early 19th centuries remained an “elite opinion.” Only a limited upper class was supposed to be well informed, capable of reasoned judgment, and therefore entitled to vote. A true “mass opinion” only came about toward the end of the 19th century. The rise of the popular press enrolled an ever larger share of the general public to participate in the ongoing debates. Workers and women claimed voting rights. It was only during these decades, then, that public opinion acquired its modern nature; that current opinions and public moods were discovered in their new form; in France, for instance, with the Dreyfus affair (see van Ginneken, 1992a).

It was also this wider context that triggered a sudden interest in the diagnosis and prognosis of public opinion (e.g., through the improved study of electoral geography), and in methods to continue to understand and improve on this geography beyond the elections themselves. Some early techniques evolved within the framework of social surveys. These were extensive investigations into the health and living conditions of the poor and the common man. They were usually initiated by politicians, in order to demonstrate the need for reform and to stave off the threat of unrest (for a historical overview, see Bulmer, Bales, & Sklar, 1991). Also within the framework of policy making, a periodic census of the entire population came into wider use.

Innovations in marketing and media research proved important, too. When national commercial radio networks emerged in the United States in the late 1920s, sampling techniques had to be further refined in order to be able to estimate audiences reached and establish advertiser rates. With the onset of the Depression, and the threat of political upheaval, electoral prognoses became more important than ever (for a historical overview, see Converse, 1987). On the eve of the 1936 elections, finally, George Gallup and others were first able to predict the outcome with confidence, after interviewing only limited samples (van Ginneken, 1986a, 1995, 1996/7, 2002/3, in press). This established the basic principles of the opinion poll. Just before, during and after World War II, the technique further spread to the rest of the Western world (van Ginneken, 1993a).

The opinion poll (and related techniques of media surveys, advertising surveys, market surveys, and personnel surveys) is first of all very practical. The point of departure is that one interviews people face to face, by telephone, in writing, or by computer. Although the problem is, of course, that people do not always know what they want, or say what they mean. The second principle is that one uses questionnaires with a certain structure and certain formulations; the problem is that with a slightly different

structure or with slightly different formulations, interviewees may give completely different answers.

A third principle is the use of multiple-choice, “closed” answer categories, in ascending or descending order of intensity. A problem is, that this forces people into the mental framework of the interviewers, researchers, or sponsors—which is not necessarily their own mental framework. A fourth principle is the use of representative samples; a problem with this is that the sample provides, by definition, only an average, bland and “instant picture.”

A fifth principle is that, with the help of statistical methods, the results are condensed into averages, percentages, scores, and other clearcut outcomes. The problem is that this creates simplicity, and kills complexity. In sum, it is a very useful technique to assemble certain basic data; but its routine use often ignores the limitations. Even the adding of other techniques (from in-depth interviews to group discussions, from expert interviews to consensus building) may fail to yield the underlying framework.

The main problem is twofold. On one hand, the technique leaves little room for configurations, in which the whole of public perception is more than the sum of its parts. On the other hand, it leaves little room for the potential of uneven change, in which accelerated shifts alternate with decelerated shifts. The American sociologist Charles Cooley already said that public opinion is “no mere aggregate of separate individual judgments, but an organization, a cooperative product of communication and reciprocal influence” (Fraser & Gaskell, 1990, p. 80). Alan Barton put it even more bluntly:

Using random sampling of individuals, the survey is a sociological meat-grinder, tearing the individual from his social context and guaranteeing that nobody in the study interacts with anyone else in it. It is a little like a biologist putting his experimental animals through a hamburger machine and looking at every hundredth cell through a microscope; anatomy and physiology get lost; structure and function disappear, and one is left with cell biology. (in Rogers, 1995, p. 120)

Rather than interpreting someone’s belief system as the sum total of his or her beliefs, and rather than interpreting public opinion as the sum total of the public’s opinions, then, we should be looking for structure and function, for elements of unevenness, and for all the differences that make a difference. What is the reverse side of someone’s expressed opinions, what is in the shadow and what is in the light? Do expressed opinions really correspond with deeper feelings and with behavior? How strongly is someone attached to his or her opinions? Under what circumstances could this pattern begin to shift? Can someone be easily persuaded, and by whom? Can he or she easily persuade others, and with what? What chances are there that group opinion may gradually drift in one direction, or in another? What fac-

tors play a role? How effective are interested parties in convincing others? What reactions may they provoke?

The relevance of such questions has been recognized by many researchers from early days (see Turner & Killian, 1987, pp. 189–192) until recently (see Fraser & Gaskell, 1990, pp. 84–87; Price, 1992, pp. 59–68). The problem is that such questions have only very partially been translated into new research methods embraced by a broad consensus of scholars, although there have been many attempts in that direction. Another reason is that many people feel research methods should be objective or “dumb” (the technique and the computer should provide the answers, the skills of the researcher should not play a role). But that is what research is all about; personal interpretation and strategic analysis by an experienced investigator is imperative in many stages of it.

This is of course the key paradox of all psychosocial science. It cannot limit itself to demonstrating lawful relations between clear-cut facts, because psychosocial science is not only about establishing clear-cut facts, but also about the attribution of meaning. Meaning is by definition complex, layered, and even contradictory. Furthermore, the interviewer, researcher, and sponsor are players in this game; they tend to accept certain interpretations over others. So psychosocial science is also about the understanding of meaningful relations. Whoever denies that interpretations are necessary and inevitable will be the first to fall victim to crude and obvious misinterpretations.

The Rise and Fall of Issues

One may also see culture or public opinion as a complex adaptive system, or a system of systems. Because a culture is a dynamic configuration of subcultures, and a public is a dynamic configuration of publics. Collective opinions, as well as individual opinions, may change every minute; every impression we undergo may slightly alter the pattern. Every event reported may do the same. Public opinion is not static, but dynamic. It is like a rivulet that seeks its way through the landscape; or rather like the duckweed or dust or oil on its surface, which is constantly forming newly evolving patterns.

The public is, in fact, an ensemble of “publics.” Several authors have pointed this out. Turner and Killian’s (1987) description, for instance, suits me well. They say, “a public is a dispersed group of people interested in and divided about an issue, engaged in a discussion of the issue, with a view to registering a collective opinion which is expected to affect the course of action of some group or individual” (p. 179). We may therefore best distinguish the public in relation to the issues involved. But what is an issue, then? An issue, according to Turner and Killian (1987), “consists of

those points about which people agree to disagree” (p. 182). That is to say, it excludes the points about which people agree from the start. Those will not be problematized; they are perceived as mere background, taken for granted. But it also excludes those points about which people disagree so thoroughly that any meaningful discussion is excluded; those will not be problematized either—they cannot form a meaningful issue for debate. Issues are about the controversies that feed everyday debate and social interaction.

So controversies that lead to considerable polarization, for instance, about civil rights or abortion (or Benetton, for that matter), do not so much form one evolving pattern but two evolving patterns, closely interwoven; the discourse and network of the protagonists and the discourse and network of the antagonists, with only a small neutral zone in between. The patterns closely follow each other. It is like the moving divide between two fluids that do not mix; or like a tango—when one partner does a step forward, the other partner does a step backward. Yet they do not dance against one another, but with one another.

Turner and Killian (1987) were careful to add that there are hardly “isolated” issues, as such.

Often it is an oversimplification to speak of the public as divided about an issue. Rather the public is frequently organized about a matrix of issues that are conceived by the public as belonging together. In some instances there is a clearly defined hierarchy of issues; in others people are uncertain what they are supposed to be deciding; and sometimes there are factional definitions of issues. (p. 192)

Think of the environment that has risen to great prominence in recent decades (and that returns throughout this book in many different guises). It could be seen as a super issue with many subissues, a matrix or hierarchy of issues.

So there is a multitude of spatiotemporal patterns in public opinion: patterns that emerge, spread, change, disappear, and reappear. The cycle usually begins with existing patterns becoming irrelevant, or loosing their grip. This is the trend toward loosing a temporary balance and advancing toward entropy, chaos, and a loss of structure. It is followed by other emerging patterns becoming more relevant, and fastening their grip. This is the trend toward establishing a new temporary balance and advancing toward *negentropy*, a new order and an increase in structure. In this context, Klapp (1978) most appropriately suggested that a kind of informational breathing takes place. That is to say an alternate “opening up for,” and “closing off to,” new information; a natural rhythm like ebb and flow.

Of course, all kinds of interested parties try to influence these processes. They try to get certain issues on the public agenda, and take other issues off the public agenda. They try to change the frames and grids through which public issues are defined—through key words, images, or events. An individual has an agenda, a meeting has an agenda, the media and the public have an agenda. An *agenda* identifies the subjects that need attention, and in what order of priority. In my previous book, *Understanding Global News* (1998, chap. 5), I demonstrated how the public agenda is largely framed by the media agenda, and the media agenda by the institutional elites. The battle for public opinion is not so much about what one wants the public to think, but about what one wants the public to think *about*. Whoever has a decisive influence over that has already half won the battle.

In her book *The Spiral of Silence*, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1984) showed that self-reinforcing processes play a key role in the evolution of public opinion. Men are social animals, fearing exclusion and isolation. If they get the impression that their opinion is loosing ground, they will express themselves less and less forcefully on this score. If, by contrast, they get the impression that their opinion is gaining ground, they will express themselves more and more forcefully, until the former opinion almost disappears and the latter opinion seems to be accepted. One way to trace these processes is to ask people not only what they think, but also to ask them what they think most other people think. This will highlight attribution errors, which may be an indication of the “drift” taking place (see also Noelle-Neumann, 1994). We later return to a more elaborate discussion of such processes.

The coming and going of issues is a more-or-less spontaneous social process; some speak of an issue attention cycle in this context. Anthony Downs (1987) once identified five stages for the United States, which may just as well apply anywhere else. Firstly the “preproblem” stage; this prevails when some highly undesirable social condition exists but has not yet captured much public attention. (In fact, according to Downs, the situation was usually worse when it was still ignored than when it was finally recognized). Second, the stage of alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm, which results in part from the claim that every problem can be solved. Third, realizing the cost of significant progress, which puts a damper on the initial eagerness. Fourth, there will be a gradual decline of intense public interest. Finally, there is the “postproblem” stage; a twilight realm of lesser attention or spasmodic recurrences.

In this latter context, the term, *issue fatigue*, has been proposed. Whenever a major new issue turns up in the mass media and in public opinion, and temporarily fills the entire screen, it is hard to imagine that it may just as easily fade away again, and be forgotten some day. Yet this is inevitably what happens if there is no periodic renewal, and often sooner than people

think. Strictly speaking, this is not because people decide that the issue is no longer important. But it is because people suddenly feel that other, newer issues are important.

Living in the present, we all too often have the implicit idea that the future is (and will remain) blank, or a mere prolongation of what is already going on. This is an optical illusion (to which we return more extensively in the final full chapter). There will always be unforeseen and surprising new issues, phasing out existing ones and thereby completely restructuring the force field. Whenever there is a huge image crisis, therefore, public relations consultants often advise their clients to simply “lie low” for a while, because the storm will inevitably blow over. Unfortunately, the reverse is true as well; whenever somebody or something has once been controversial, only very little fuel is needed to revive the flames.

Emotional Coloring of Issues

The existing literature about public opinion places a heavy emphasis on rationality and lucid deliberation. This literature is a product of the Enlightenment, and is closely connected with the democratic ideal. The existing literature about rapid shifts in public opinion, by contrast, about mass psychology and collective behavior sociology, places a heavy emphasis on emotionality and “blind” processes. This literature is primarily about supposed threats to the liberal order (more in van Ginneken 1992a). Yet this strict opposition of “rationality” and “emotionality” is a typically modern Western illusion. There is hardly any rational behavior that is not colored by accompanying emotions, and there is hardly any emotional behavior that does not also have an underlying ratio. We later return to this subject, in Part III of this book, about shifting public moods.

But let us at this early stage delve somewhat into what emotions, emotional coloring, and moods really mean. Not all scholars agree, and handbooks distinguish a few major approaches. A handbook by Cornelius (1988) first distinguished the elder tradition of the British biologist Charles Darwin, who emphasized the role of emotions in adaptation and survival. Secondly, it identified the elder tradition of the American psychologist William James, who emphasized the nature of emotions as primarily physical reactions. Third, Cornelius (1988) identified the more recent tradition of *cognitivism*, which sees emotions as the “raw appraisal” of a situation. And fourth, he identified the more recent tradition of *social constructivism*, which claims that emotions are shaped by socialization and culture (see also Harré, 1986).

Yet all these approaches have a few points in common, for instance that emotions have a well-defined function. The handbook by Oatley and Jenkins (1996) stated that emotions are a way to deal quickly and efficiently

with new and unexpected situations. Lower animals do not need emotions because their appraisal of the world is quite simple. God does not need emotions, because his appraisal of the world is perfect. Higher animals and humans need emotions, however, as a kind of heuristic; as a means to facilitate “approximately” adequate responses to new situations. They are partly innate, partly learned.

Fischer (1991) connected the psychophysiological notion of emotion to the sociocognitivist notion of “script.” Fischer says that emotional scripts have three different functions. First of all they imply a raw appraisal of the situation. Second, they guide expression. And third, they imply expectations about the outcome of the behavior. Emotions thus provide a basic repertory of reaction patterns, which meaningfully connect various aspects of human functioning. In primary, secondary, or tertiary emotions, this need not always be aspects on the same levels. Sometimes the configuration includes physiological aspects (e.g., triggered by the autonomous nervous system), sometimes it includes neurological aspects (such as arousal), psychological aspects (tendencies to act), and so forth.

If we limit ourselves to cognitive functions alone, we see that emotions may activate and deactivate various functions, and lead to qualitatively different states of readiness. There is, for instance, selective exposure; fear may heighten alertness to marginal stimuli, which might otherwise be easily overlooked. There is selective perception; fear may automatically lead us to choose one interpretation of an ambiguous stimulus over another (i.e., to see it as a possible threat). There is selective retention; fear may activate or deactivate certain related memories. There is also selective reproduction, and so on (Oatley & Jenkins, 1996; also see Cornelius, 1996).

In Part III of this book, I propose to extend these arguments along two different lines. As some of the mentioned authors have already noted, not only flash emotions but prolonged moods also have similar aspects. They form qualitatively different basic configurations that facilitate our psychological functioning along certain lines. When we are joyful, we react differently to exactly the same situation as when we are depressed. As other authors noted, this does not only hold for individual behavior, but sometimes for collective behavior as well. We see in Part II (about collective behavior) how and why this is the case (also see Lofland, 1985).

We see that various moods do not only provide different frameworks for individual reactions, but also for social interactions (see Scheff’s 1990, *Microsociology*, in this regard). The aforementioned Turner and Killian (1987) spoke about keynoting, symbolization, and coordination as three processes that give collective behavior its specific character. We see in Part III that this basic pattern is entirely different for collective joy or collective grief, collective fear or collective courage, collective outrage or collective resignation. What is more, minor details may help such moods slip from