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Communication Culture on a Mass Scale: Ancient Roman Games and Methods of Communicating with the Audience

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to analyse sources on a verbal and written mass communication between the organisers of the games (*editores*) and the audience in ancient Rome. Methods established by the Romans as senders and recipients of the conveyed information gave a range of possibilities to communicate needs and preferences, as well as to express often extreme emotions. The model, the creation of which stemmed from the necessity to inform the audience about the upcoming arena events (by the organiser) and to communicate the experienced emotions (by spectators), became over time the distinctive culture of communication, applied before the games but also throughout the event and after it ended. This communicative social construct typical of ancient Rome was necessary for the efficient distribution of oral and textual messages. The preserved sources allow us to state that the communication model included: 1) verbal/oral information conveyed to the public by the games organisers (via the announcements made by heralds); people's cheers and chants (including both criticism and praise); 2) written information conveyed by the organisers (*edicta munerum* advertising the games before the event and announcements presented on placards distributed around the theatres and amphitheatres throughout the event); *acclamationes* and *graffiti*, painted and inscribed accordingly, by the audience after the *spactacula*. This article is to define the individual types of ancient methods of oral and written communication, to determine their function depending on their context, and to establish their effectiveness in the discourse carried out on a mass scale in ancient Rome.

KEYWORDS: ancient Rome, Roman games, audience, culture of communication, mass communication

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STRESZCZENIE

Kultura komunikacji na skalę masową: starożytne igrzyska rzymskie i metody komunikacji z widownią

Celem artykułu jest przeanalizowanie źródeł dotyczących masowej komunikacji werbalnej i pisemnej między organizatorami igrzysk (*editores*) a widzami w starożytnym Rzymie. Metody wykształcone przez Rzymian jako nadawców i odbiorców przekazywanych informacji stworzyły wachlarz możliwości do komunikowania potrzeb i preferencji, a także do wyrażania, często skrajnych, emocji. Model, którego wytworzenie wynikało z konieczności informowania widowni o nadchodzących wydarzeniach na arenie (przez organizatora *spectaculum*) oraz komunikowania doświadczanych odczuć i wrażeń (przez widza), stał się z czasem swoistą kulturą komunikacji funkcjonującą przed igrzyskami, w ich czasie, ale także już po ich zakończeniu. Ten komunikacyjny konstrukt społeczny typowy dla starożytnego Rzymu był niezbędny do sprawnego przekazywania komunikatów ustnych i tekstowych. Na podstawie zachowanych źródeł można stwierdzić, że model komunikacyjny uwzględniał: 1) informacje ustne przekazywane tłumom na widowni przez organizatorów igrzysk (za pomocą m.in. zapowiedzi ogłaszanych przez heroldów); okrzyki i skandowanie publiczności (zawierające zarówno krytykę, jak i pochwały); oraz 2) informacje pisemne organizatorów (*edicta munerum* reklamujące igrzyska przed ich wystawieniem i ogłoszenia przedstawione na zapisanych tablicach roznoszonych po teatrach i amfiteatrach w czasie danego wydarzenia); *acclamationes* i *graffiti*, odpowiednio malowane i wyrzeźbione przez widzów po odbytych już *spectacula*. Artykuł ten ma za zadanie zdefiniować poszczególne rodzaje starożytnych metod komunikacji werbalnej i pisemnej, określić ich funkcje w zależności od kontekstu oraz ustalić ich skuteczność w dyskursie prowadzonym na skalę masową w starożytnym Rzymie.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: igrzyska, starożytny Rzym, widzowie, kultura komunikacji, komunikacja masowa

Mass communication, understood as conveying information on a largest scale to the greatest number of recipients possible, is a social construct which requires reference to the modern theory of communication (Nevett & Nevett, 1987; Lewiński, 2008; Fleischer, 2007; 2011) when studying the ancient past. While the communication between the Romans in their private sphere has already been examined in detail in academic publications on the ancient epistemology (Tempest, 2011; Frampton, 2019), and the behaviour of crowds during various political events has been the subject of equally frequent polemics (Millar, 1998), the communication between the games' organisers and the audiences of *spectacula* has not been examined

so far. The direct and indirect communication between the spectators and the game *editores* (organisers and sponsors) also reflects yet another gap in the studies on the culture of ancient communication.¹ However, there are both literary and archaeological sources the analysis of which allows us to distinguish four fundamental groups of communication taking place before the games, in the course of the events, and after the shows were over: 1. direct oral communication (chants, exhortations, audience cheering); 2. indirect oral communication (*editor*, e.g. the emperor, who addressed the spectators with the help of heralds); 3. indirect written communication (*editores* advertising the upcoming games with *edicta munerum*, a special type of inscribed advertisements; the so-called *acclamations*, a type of commemorative inscriptions expressing the audience's gratitude to the sponsor for organising the event); 4. direct written communication (*graf-fiti* made after the games by games' enthusiasts). The distinction between "direct" and "indirect" conveying of information was based on a communication model where the "direct" transmission of messages was done in the "official" capacity, as face-to-face, freely expressed oral or written statements, made without the involvement of a third party. In contrast, the "indirect" transmission required an intermediary between people involved in the communication process (either the heralds who spoke on behalf of the *editores* or *scriptores* who painted game advertisements for sponsors).

The available sources do not offer a simple answer to the question concerning the most effective method of communication between the *editores* and spectators, and *vice versa*, but classifying the sources into the above-mentioned groups enables us to determine the most popular method for expressing opinions and emotions which involved the organisers of the *spectacula* and the crowds at the shows to the same extent.

I. *Editores* and communicating with the crowd

Oral communication of questions, ideas, and needs is the basic form of making contact. Despite the lack of extensive research on the methods of obtaining information in antiquity, the sources prove that conveying information by means of verbal messages was the primary method

1 The word "games" was used in the article interchangeably with the words "shows" and "*spectacula*", as generic terms for various types of entertainment organised on a large scale in ancient Rome. In specific cases, e.g., theatre performances, *munera* (gladiatorial fights), and *venationes* (hunts for wild animals at an arena), which were popular events among the masses, the article discusses their role separately due to their historical context and the role they played in creating the communication model between the game sponsors and the audience.

for exchanging the necessary details (Petr. *Sat.* 97.1; Cic. *Fam.* II.3.1 and VII.29.1-2; Suet. *Iul.* 26; Tac. *Ann.* 14.21; cf. Susini, 1988; Kaiser, 2011). Due to its ephemeral nature, the oral communication in antiquity has so far been studied mainly from the perspective of the best-preserved sources on the art of verbal persuasion, i.e., ancient rhetoric (political, commemorative, funerary speeches, pre-battle *exhortationes*), assuming that the persuasion's effectiveness was based on the speaker's skill to effectively convince others to his opinion (Dominik, 1997; Connolly, 2007; Lewiński, 2008). The rhetoric was based on an extensive apparatus of how the words and sentences' rhythm were used, on the rhetorical devices and the steady build-up to the highlight of a given argumentation. Developed in this way, constantly perfected and highly formalised type of oral communication had no *raison d'être* among people who, as official game organisers, tried to establish closer contact with the audience in the Roman theatres, amphitheatres, and circuses during mass events. Winning over the audience's support was by no means based on the principles dictated by the art of rhetoric, even though its element, persuasion, was skillfully used by some methods of communicating with the crowd (Dominik, 1997; Connolly, 2007; Lewiński, 2008). It is possible to distinguish two separate stages in communication with the spectators: 1. information was efficiently conveyed before the *spectacula* even began; 2. information was exchanged in the course of the event. Maintaining the contact with the audience was particularly important if an exceptional situation took place during the show, which fueled the audience's extreme emotions and required a quick reaction from the event's organiser. The fastest way for the sponsor to win over the crowd's affection was to convey his messages to the gathered spectators with the help of the heralds.

Sources confirm that in the 1st c. AD, heralds had a permanent presence in the process of effective communication between the games' sponsors and the audience. The heralds' function did not differ much from private messengers (couriers) whose role in the 1st c. BC was to announce (*declarare*) the upcoming games in the public forum on behalf of their patrons-owners (Cic. *Fam.* 2.3.1). The word *pronuntiare* used by Suetonius (*Iul.* 26) has a similar overtone in the context of the Roman games, suggesting that Julius Caesar was not the person who announced the gladiatorial fights organised in honour of his daughter himself, but rather by a person sent by him to inform the public about his plans. The exact tasks were carried out by the *praecones*, whose responsibility was to convey the information orally to a wider audience (Petr., *Sat.* 97.1; Suet., *Dom.* 13.1).²

2 The equivalent of *praecones* at events taking place in a circus was probably a *circi nuntius*, referred to in the epigraphic sources (*AE* 1971.44); cf. Kruschwitz, 2016.

They were men who opened the games, inviting the spectators with a phrase characteristic for this occasion: to watch the shows “which no one has ever seen before and no one will ever see again” (Suet., *Claud.* 21.2). This statement reflects a verbal cliché, well-known by the audience, about the “uniqueness” of the games, which, in reality, had a repetitive program, particularly in the smaller centres of ancient Rome. Therefore, the already familiar and fairly ordinary oral messages communicated to the crowd by the *praecones* who were promising an exceptional entertainment, could become not entirely effective over time. In the case of the event reported by Suetonius, the verbal communication had the opposite effect, ridiculing not only the ambitious plans of emperor Claudius about giving original *ludi saeculares*, but also the actors who were once again performing the same role in theatre plays that were already well-known to the spectators (Suet., *Claud.* 21.2).

The people arriving in the theatres and amphitheatres always expected new emotional stimuli and they could not be satisfied with average or repetitive forms of entertainment, which meant that the pressure on *editores* was directly proportional to the developing technologies presented at the Roman arenas (Hammer, 2010). The performances of athletes, gladiators and *venatores* were to be constantly fuelled by the notion of an event’s exclusivity, and the audience started to demand a less traditional and more individualised contact with the games’ organiser. Cassius Dio (60.13.5) confirms the need for a closer bond between the audience and the patron of the shows, stating that emperor Claudius won the spectators’ special gratitude by the fact of “mixing” with the crowd and limiting the role of the heralds in his contacts with the audience. Instead of oral messages, the emperor began to communicate with the audience also via announcements written on placards which were most likely distributed to different parts of theatres, amphitheatres and circuses in order to inform the crowd more effectively about the events taking place at the *spectacular* people were in the process of watching. This information was also confirmed by Suetonius who additionally points out that due to the written placards contact with the audience took on the characteristics of invitations extended to people gathered in the audience, encouraging them to spend the games in merriment (Suet. *Claud.* 21.5: *tabulam ilico misit admonens populum*).³

The heralds’ role was therefore extended to carrying around the placards and reading aloud the details written on them so that as many people in the audience as possible were informed about the messages the *editor*

3 *Proclamationes* issued by Emperor Claudius about *sportulae* offered to the crowds were also presented in the form of invitations (Suet., *Claud.* 21.4).

wanted to personally convey to them. Other ancient sources also report that the verbal and written communication became the basis for making contact with the crowd (Mart., *Spect.* 4, 7, 9; Petron., *Sat.* 45.7; Plin., *Pan.* 34-35; Strabo, *Geogr.* 6.2.6; Sen., *Epist.* 7.5).⁴ The extension of tasks the *praecones* carried out was a result of the fact that the welcoming phrases addressed to the spectators ceased to meet their expectations, particularly if the oral messages had a limited reach and could be heard only by people sitting within the earshot from the heralds. Using the placards in order to inform the audience gathered in the Circus Maximus about Androcles, a slave and former official sentenced to the *ad bestias* punishment, and a lion which showed mercy to its victim instead of aggression, served the purpose of telling the story to the audience about an extraordinary friendship between Androcles and the lion whose life Androcles had once saved during the local *venatio*. Aulus Gellius (*NA* 5.14) states that Emperor Caligula told the spectators the entire story of the friendship between the man and the lion by means of placards circulating around the circus and explaining to the gathered the reason why the lion did not want to attack its former protector. It should be assumed that in the case of such a complex story as the one described by Gellius about the reunion of Androcles and the lion, the distribution of the placards was combined with oral messages explaining the situation to the surprised spectators in the stands.⁵

It is not known how long the heralds carried out their tasks for, but the last reference in the sources on their verbal-only communication during local spectacles is at the event in a circus during Hadrian's reign (Dio 69.16.3).⁶ However, if the method of communicating via heralds who distributed *and* read the placards was as effective as the sources suggest, it does not seem probable that the help of the *praecones* was significantly limited in the mass communication already in the 2nd c. AD. A mosaic from Smirat with the figure of a certain Magerius, dated to the 3rd c. AD, confirms that at least in the areas of Roman Africa the transmission of

4 Cf. Au. Gell., *NA* 5.14.29.

5 Cf. the narrative of this event in Aelian (*Nat. Anim.*), where the information about Androcles and his first encounter with the lion, when the animal's life was saved, were supposedly circulated verbally between the spectators. Nevertheless, this fact does not exclude the presence of *praeco* who could have recounted the story to the crowd in order to explain the lion's reluctance to attack his saviour and guardian from the past. Even though the Androcles story should be read as a folktale, the very process of communicating the adventures of the lion and his caretaker to the audience represents the possible method of providing a large number of people with a long background story to the scenes taking place before their eyes.

6 A similar reference, but dated to the reign of Emperor Domitian, informs us how during the festival in honour of Capitoline Jupiter, the emperor requested via his *praeco* that the audience, loudly cheering in support of Palfurius Sura at the oratory contest, remain quiet (Suet., *Dom.* 13.1).

information was still continued via heralds. The mosaic presents a fragment of a text confirming the verbal communication with the crowd: “*per curionem/dictum: ‘domi/ni mei’ ...*” (“said by the herald: ‘my lords ...’”). It seems that the possibility of a complete elimination of this method of communicating with the crowd verbally was not entirely feasible in a society where literacy (also among the games’ enthusiasts) was scarce (Harris, 1983; Bowman, 1991; Woolf, 2015). Paradoxically, however, the sources often mention that the communication with the audience during the shows was introduced only via placards, without and suggestions that their content was read out loud. It is clear that people sentenced to death were sent to the arena with a placard which had written information about their offences. Such placards were given not only to *delatores* who were paraded around the amphitheatre so that the spectators would learn about their denouncing activities to the detriment of other people, but also to Christians whose offence was the very fact of believing in one god (Coleman, 1999). Eusebius (*Hist. Eccl.* 5.1.43–44) describes how a certain Attalus was paraded around the amphitheatre in Lyon with a following placard: “This is Attalus, a Christian.” Emperor Domitian, outraged at the critical words of a spectator about his favourite gladiators, ordered to have the man sent to the arena with the following placard: “(here is) an admirer of the Thracian who speaks blasphemously” (Suet., *Dom.* 10.1). It seems that writing down the information about someone’s offences on a placard and sending the offender to the arena with it was a recognisable cultural code, a standard signal that the given person was to be punished. However, the sources do not explain whether the very act of placing a placard on the convict was a sufficient explanation for the crowd of the actual offence, or if it was necessary for the guards and *praecones* to provide additional, oral accounts of the convicted man’s offence. It should be assumed that if the guilty person was purposely paraded around the arena in order to make sure that his or her wrongdoing was communicated to all those gathered in the stands, the placard itself, regardless of its symbolism as a sign of a perpetrated crime, was not an element that was fully explaining the transgressions of the person who was to be punished. The offence of Polycarp of Smyrna executed in the arena in the mid-2nd c. AD had been announced three times before the execution, even though his local activities as a Christian bishop, and thus his “crime,” was well known to the people in the audience (*Mart. Poly.* 9–16). Therefore, it can be suggested that the oral messages were a major method for making contact with the spectators, but over time they were also supplemented with fragmentary texts written on placards, referring to the course of events in the arena or the offences of people who were punished there. The placards’ content was most likely read out loud so that the information would reach the groups of recipients in every section

of a theatre, amphitheatre, or circus. From the perspective of the games' organiser, complementarity of the verbal and written messages provided the fastest and the most effective form of contact with the present crowd, particularly if the spectators were 1. seated far from the *praeco* conveying the words of the games' sponsor, 2. did not react to the show they watched in a manner that was satisfactory to the games' patron, 3. illiterate.

Editores did not leave the success of their games to chance or in the hands of heralds' skills in announcing the news during an ongoing event. At least a few weeks, or even months, before the planned shows, the walls of the Roman buildings were covered with the *edicta munerum*, notices made with a paintbrush, which can be compared to today's posters advertising cultural events. The *edicta* found in Pompeii and Herculaneum prove that they were a separate group of *dipinti* (painted inscriptions), the task of which was not only to announce specific information about the date and time of the upcoming event, but also to encourage the potential spectators to come to the games by the promises included in the inscriptions: high numbers of fighting gladiators, contesting *athletae*, and *noxii* condemned to die. Additionally, the games sponsors promised in their advertisement the access to *velarium* (linen awnings for the protection from the sun) and *venationes* as special incentives for the audience. Despite the fact that the promises about the *velarium* and *venationes* are typical of the textual content of the *edicta*⁷, their inclusion in the advertising notices suggests that there must have been situations where these two factors, aimed at mobilising and encouraging the spectators to join to the upcoming games, were not available. The repetitiveness of the phrase "*venatio et vela erunt*" confirms that the access to the awnings during the games as well as the possibility to watch the hunts for wild animals in the Campanian amphitheatres were a greater attraction for the local resident than has been previously stated in the academic works on the ancient Roman games (Miączewska, 2023). At the same time, the absence of the above-mentioned phrase in the vast majority of the uncovered Pompeian *edicta* suggests that both the *velaria* and *venationes* were not the usual elements in the programmes of all the mass events held in the theatres and amphitheatres.

Arranging the written contact with the spectators long before the organised entertainments was a prerogative for the *editores* sponsoring gladiatorial fights, contests between sportsmen, and hunts for wild animals. In contrast, there is no archeological evidence for any written communication with the potential spectators of theatre performances or chariot races, which in itself is an interesting exception, particularly when one considers

7 The popular phrase "*venatio et vela erunt*" can be found on at least seven *edicta munerum* from ancient Pompeii (e.g., *CIL* IV 1185, 1189, 1190, 1199, 1202, 3884, 9962).

the great popularity of these two mass events among the Roman audience. The reason for the lack of the organisers' written communication before the performances in the theatres and the races in the *circi* was probably due to the permanent presence of these events in the programme of the Roman *ludi*. These religious celebrations and festivities, the calendar of which was already predetermined and known by everyone, could have their dates and programmes changed only by the emperor who could interfere with the previously set dates of the upcoming ceremonies (Tuck, 2008/2009). In turn, the Roman *munera* could be independent of the official *ludi*. Even though they were often part of their programme, the *munera* were also organised by private sponsors who were interested in their own personal benefits when financing the games because they wanted to win the society's support in the upcoming elections for local offices. The written information about the dates of the games organised by them stemmed from the necessity to plan their own *munus* in advance, in the days that would not overlap with the official holidays and festivals celebrated by the well-known politicians, and then also by the emperors, in the capital. Therefore, the shows organised on one's own initiative, usually by the *editores* from smaller centres of Italy, had to be advertised much better than other games, if only for the reason that the spectators travelling to Rome for specific *ludi* were willing to visit the less known centres as well. The written communication in the form of the *edicta* was used by the *editores* also due to the necessity to inform the local residents about the upcoming events in their own local centres so that the spectator who were tempted to attend the games in the capital could reconcile the dates of the shows taking place in their own region and in Rome itself.

Communication with a potential viewer by means of inscriptions was crucial for people financing the games also because it could have a direct impact on the attendance at the event which, in turn, could influence the popularity of the games organiser and how he was viewed by the public. The spectators' attitude determined the results of the elections for high offices in a given centre. The advertising of the shows was not done only in writing though. James L. Franklin (1991) studied the difficult issue of verifying the effectiveness of the written communication represented by the *edicta munerum* with the topic of the society's reading skills and whether the potential audience was able to read the content of the games advertisements. The results of his research suggested that the rather schematic artistic form of the *edicta* and their usually conventional and basic content, painted by *scriptores*, allowed the average resident of ancient Campania to easily identify the *dipinto* as an inscription advertising the upcoming games. Some phrases repeated in the inscriptions, e.g. the above-mentioned "*venation et vela erunt*," or even more frequently used slogan

“*glad(iatorium) paria,*” were so easily recognizable, according to Franklin, that reading and understanding them was never a problem for the illiterate people. However, the cognitive experiences of noticing and interpreting the *edictum* as an easily recognizable advertisement, which Franklin suggested, is by no means equivalent to the illiterate spectator’s ability to read the entire inscription and understand all the nuances in its content, e.g. dates, venues where the games were going to take place, reasons for offering the shows, additional attractions planned by the *editores* for the audience, comments about postponing the event, weather conditions, etc. Even the most conventional *edicta* with the most schematic content included written fragments which could not be understandable for the illiterate, and mere visual recognition of the inscription as an advertisement cannot be considered as equivalent with reading and comprehending the entire message conveyed in the *edictum*. In view of Franklin’s generalised theory about the alleged stereotypical nature of the advertisements’ form and content, it should be suggested that the lack of possibility to understand the details included in the *edicta* by some of the spectators must have been compensated to the audience, at least in part, by the sponsors who most likely communicated the news about the games he financed with the help of the town criers, hired for this very purpose.⁸ Nevertheless, the limited methods of communicating the information that were to reach the largest possible group of recipients turned out to be problematic not only for an average spectator of the upcoming events, but also for the then elites. In a letter to his friend Atticus, Marcus Tullius Cicero expresses his impatience about still not knowing the dates of the upcoming festival (*die Olympia*) and mysteries (*mysteria*), which were to partly determine his own plans for his future journey (Cic., *Att.* 15.25). The lack of details on the two events mentioned by Cicero, who was at the time in his villa in Tusculum, confirms that the smaller villages and towns, situated further away from the centre of the Roman empire, could face some issues with obtaining any notifications (oral or written) about the mass events organised in the near future.

A pressing need for providing regular notifications to the population living in the smaller centres is confirmed by the *edicta munerum*. The Pompeian inscriptions were placed not only on the buildings of the city where the advertised games were to take place, but also around the buildings of other Campanian centres. Thus, it was a standard process to paint the advertisements on the buildings in Pompeii even though the

8 The sources confirm that even political edicts and written speeches given by leading Roman politicians were removed from the places where they had previously been situated and read to the interested crowds (Cic., *Att.* 2.20.4).

upcoming event was going to take place, e.g., in the neighbouring Nola or Nuceria (np. *CIL* IV1195, 10161). Despite the limited amount of archaeological evidence, there are indications that the entire process of advertising the shows in various parts of Campania was based on a rotary system, in which each town and city painted the notices about upcoming games organised elsewhere in the region.⁹ Additionally, the *edicta munerum* were also placed on tombstones situated outside of the city *pomerium*, along the roads leading to Roman towns. Since some of the cemetery alleyways were situated along the city walls and, just like the Via delle Tombe in Pompeii, were used as a ring road (Campbell, 2015), people travelling along this thoroughfare could obtain information about mass events upcoming in the region without actually entering the said centre. It should be assumed that the method of painting the *edicta* in the most visible places on buildings and along roads leading to towns and cities aimed at providing the most functional, and thus far-reaching and thorough access for the people to the messages about the games.

An additional form of communication used by *editores* before the shows was the distribution of the so-called *libelli* – leaflets or brochures – with a programme of entertainment for all the days of the show. Due to Cicero’s comment in the *Philippics* about the *libelli* (Cic. *Phil.* 2.97), it may be stated that they were regularly and widely distributed to the largest possible group of people. Moreover, the *libelli* had to be paid for so it was most likely the *editores* who covered the expenses of publishing and distributing the brochures, trying to get back at least a fraction of the costs incurred when making the leaflets. Despite the cost of the programmes, the “unlimited” number of the *libelli*, according to Cicero, reflects the audience’s actual demand for this form of detailed written communication about the games. Ovid (*Ars am.* 1.167) recalls a scene where the audience watching gladiatorial fights checks the content of the *libelli* already during the show, asking about the pairs of fighters and placing bets on the combats. The popularity of the purchased *libelli* suggests that the price the spectators were willing to pay for the brochures could not have been overly expensive since many people coming to watch the *spectacula* could afford them. Although this type of a written communication did not give the *editores* the opportunity to control the audience’s reaction to the detailed content of the *libelli*, offering the spectators an option of having access to the entire programme of the games right before they started was a well-functioning method to build tension and increase the audience’s anticipation

9 I.e., inscription *AE* 182b from Herculaneum is most likely an advertisement for the games held in Nola.

about the most-awaited gladiatorial duels presented in the brochures.¹⁰ It is also possible that the programmes were a kind of souvenirs for the spectators, bought as tokens of the unique games they attended. The *libelli* could have also served as written messages which allowed the audience to continue commenting about the mass event long after it ended.¹¹ This, in turn, gave the games sponsor a chance to maintain the aura of his successful show, and thus to carry on emphasising his prestige in the local community.

II. Reaction of the crowd and spectator feedback

While the information conveyed to the crowd orally was of a formalised nature during the games, and the *edicta* created a separate group of official *dipinti* intended only for the advertising of the *munera*, the audience's communication with the games' sponsor seems to have been rather chaotic and dictated solely by the emotions of the participants of mass events. The basic method the spectators used to signal these, often extreme, feelings and reactions was to shout out praises and requests, as well as complaints and offensive remarks. Even though not all of them were addressed directly to the sponsor of the event, they were aimed at triggering his response. The crowd addressed the games' organiser mainly with specific requests, while all the grievances and negative assessments of the entertainment people watched were reserved for ineffective gladiators, badly trained *athletae*, lazy wild animals unwilling to attack their victims, and uneventful theatre performances (Cic. *Fam.* 2.3.1, 7.1.1; Symma., *Epist.* 6.43, 9.141, 9.151). The phenomenon of psychological ties between the spectators of the "deadly games" was studied in detail by Garrett Fagan (2011) who emphasised the importance of an active participation in the joint celebration of a given event which included, among other things, the expression of verbal messages addressing the games' sponsor, which gave the audience a sense of control over at least one aspect of their lives. The audience's feelings of having advantage over the event's organiser was, however, an important element in determining whether the event was proceeding with success or if it was merely an uninteresting break from the bleak reality of the Roman crowd. Suetonius (*Dom.* 4.5 and 13.1) confirms that the audience enthusiastically chanted the words "*domino et dominae feliciter*" in the amphitheatre when addressing the emperor as the games' patron which undoubtedly resulted in him having more generous gifts distributed to the cheering

10 Cf. Sen., *Contr.* 4.

11 Cf. Cic. *Fam.* 2.8.1.

crowd.¹² The more lavish and extravagant the shows in the city of Rome were, the more were the audiences encouraged to express their views. The spectators' unrestrained enthusiasm about the *spectacula* at the time of their celebration managed to win a positive attitude of the *editores* and answer the audience's requests with equal eagerness. The sources confirm that the emperors holding the games often treated the spectators with kindness, and leniency even, refusing them nothing and sometimes even encouraging the spectators to openly ask when they wanted (Suet., *Tit.* 8.2). These situations suggest the functioning of some kind of dialogue between the game organiser and the gathered who responded to the patron's questions regarding their wishes and hopes about the events taking place in front of their eyes (Suet., *Cal.* 18.3; *Tit.* 8.2; *Dom.* 4.1). The behaviour of Emperor Claudius who, just like the example from the Magerius mosaic, addressed the crowd with the word *domini* (Suet., *Claud.* 21.5) is also an interesting case in point. When the spectators requested that a gladiator known as Palumbus (Dove) was allowed to fight, the emperor used a humorous retort to communicate his answer. It was a well-established social pattern that the audience could make requests about specific gladiators, decide about life and death of the fighting men, manifest their feelings through the words of either frustration or satisfaction, but also pass judgement about the success or complete fiasco of the spectacles they watched.¹³ It was partly for this reason that Juvenal (*Sat.* 3.36–37) mocked the parvenu *editores* who could afford to sponsor the games but, according to the poet, their shows were sadly taking place at the cost of meeting the requirements of a capricious and demanding audience.

Despite the audience's verbal advantage in communicating their emotions and the cases when the *editores* were actually inclined to meet the spectators' expectations, not all the mass events and not every form of entertainment resulted in a positive relationship between the audience and the games' patron. The crowd gathered at the games of Gnaeus Pompeius

12 Similar examples of enthusiastic cheering are given by Cassius Dio (72[73].18.2). The above-mentioned Magerius mosaic presents his name in vocative ("Mageri!"), confirming the joyful cries of the spectators in honour of the game sponsor, and their dialogue, slightly exaggerated as was typical of the commemorative mosaics, which begins with the words "*adclamatatum est*" ("they exclaimed").

13 See, e.g., the audience demanding to see specific gladiators at the arena: Mart., *Spect.* 23; Suet., *Cal.* 30.2, *Dom.* 4.1; the audience demanding that Polycarp be torn apart by lions: Mart. *Pol.* 9-16; the spectators' shouts expressing emotions: Petr., *Sat.* 45.12 ("*adhibete!*") and Verg., *Aen.* 12.296 ("*hoc habet!*"); words such as "*misus!*" and "*iugula!*" are known from inscription CIL IX.1671; "*neco*" and "*heac videmus!*" illustrated on the so-called Symmachus mosaic, dated to the 3rd c. AD (CIL VI.10205), are similar to the Magerius mosaic in the context of the audience's direct approach when addressing the games organiser ("*Symmachi! Homo felix!*").

Magnus was unpleasantly surprised and taken aback by the way the elephants were brought by Pompeius to Rome in 55 BC. People reacted in an opposite way to what was expected by the general: the audience felt sorry for the animals and openly expressed their grief, a fact extensively commented on by Cicero (*Fam.* 7.1.3).¹⁴ A similarly unexpected situation took place when two women, Felicity and Perpetua, condemned to the *ad bestias* punishment were brought to the arena naked, which caused an outrage among the spectators who demanded to have the women's bodies covered (*Pass. Perp. et Fel.* 20.2ff). The sources do not refer to the exact words used by the audience but the communicated displeasure was so effective that the decision was made, probably by the games' sponsor, to send the women away from the arena. When they returned fully clothed, the crowd demanded that they die from a gladiator's sword and not from unsuccessful attacks of a wild animal. Ultimately, the games' patron, provoked by the spectators to act, agreed to all their requests. However, the *editores* were not always so eager to meet the crowd's expectations. A rather extreme situation took place at one of the violent shows in Rome where the enthusiastic behaviour of the audience during brutal practices in the arena outraged emperor Caligula so much that he issued an official edict condemning the spectators who watched the massacre with admiration and enthusiasm (*Suet. Cal.* 30.3).¹⁵ Due to carelessly expressed criticism, the audience could also face some serious backlash. A man who spoke critically about emperor Domitian's favourite gladiators was sent by him to the arena as a punishment (*Suet., Dom.* 10.1). Despite the fact that these examples are isolated cases in the sources, they do confirm the functioning of some peculiar limitations in the audience's oral communication with the patrons. Not every reaction was allowed, not every critical comment was treated with leniency, and the spectators, despite their advantage in numbers, had to consider the fact that the very last word always belonged to the sponsor and that the *status quo* of the social ranking had to be maintained.

While messages communicated by the public could trigger various reactions of the *editores* in Rome, little is known about any repercussions the displeased spectators had to face after expressing their criticism about the *spectacula* they watched in the smaller cities of Italy. An excerpt from

14 The Roman poet Publius Papinius Statius (*Silu.* 2.5) wrote an entire poem on a tamed lion whose death was mourned by the audience. A similar sentiment was expressed by the spectators in 64 A.D. when instead of a great rage at Christians, the alleged perpetrators of the fire in Rome, the audience commented on their death with sorrow (*Tac., Ann.* 15.44.4-5).

15 Not every form of violence was accepted by the games' organisers and, most likely, not every brutal act was pleasing to the audience. Cf. *Sen., Ep.* 7.2.

Petronius' *Satyricon* (45.10-12) suggests that a negative assessment of the games by the audience could at best expose the *editor* to embarrassment and undermine his popularity, but there is no evidence that it threatened the critical spectators in any way. On the other hand, it is quite clear that negative comments made by the audience must have been acutely felt by the *editores*, particularly if holding the games was the proverbial "to be or not to be" of the potential, or continued, political career of the local officials. Out of more than 90 *edicta munerum* found in Pompeii, the vast majority advertised shows sponsored by the already well-known politicians in the region (e.g., Gnaeus Alleius Nigidius Maius in *CIL* IV 7993 and 3883), while other men were only aspiring to become local officials (e.g., Decimus Lucretius Valens in *CIL* IV 7992 and 7995). There are only two *edicta* advertising games financed by the city and organised by the incumbent aedile (*CIL* IV 1189 and 1190). All other *edicta* advertised the shows that had to be paid for with the patron's own money. Thus, any criticism of privately organised *spectacula* was detrimental to a given sponsor because it was closely linked with the possible setback in his future career.

Informal verbal communication in the form of shouting and chanting was not the only means of making contact with the *editores* during the games. The sources mentioned below confirm that regardless of the audience's attitude toward the games sponsor, people would always try to establish a more or less direct contact with him. The *libelli* described above, i.e., the programmes of the *spectacula* available to the audience before every event, could also serve as an informal, albeit widely distributed, criticism against the *editores*. Suetonius (*Tib.* 66.1) reports an incident when *libelli*, this time in a form of offensive pamphlets addressing Emperor Tiberius, were distributed to the spectators before the theatre play. Thereby, the emperor learnt about the rumours circulating about him and tried to address the acts he was allegedly guilty of committing by issuing and distributing his own *libelli* (Suet., *Tib.* 66.1; cf. Suet., *Nero* 39.2, 45.2). Although in this case the use of the *libelli* by the public is only an indirect form of communicating with the patron of the spectacle (nothing is known about the author of the *libelli* and who distributed the critical pamphlets to the audience), it is worth emphasising the universal presence of the *libelli* as an effective method of expressing anonymous objections against and frustration with specific situations or the *editores'* behaviours which the audience did not accept. The *libelli* as lampoons written against the Roman politicians appeared as early as the late Roman republic and were used anonymously to manifest the society's criticism. They served the crowds as their communication medium at least until the reign of Emperor Vitellius (Suet., *Iul.* 79.2; *Aug.* 55; *Vit.* 14.4). Using the *libelli* as lampoons in order to externalise the emotions about a specific

situation taking place throughout the games seems to be an extension of their already widespread presence in the written communication culture of ancient Rome.

The second important element in the context of the games were inscriptions which one could nowadays define as posters or placards, on which the residents announced that, e.g., they would sacrifice their own life as gladiators for the recovery of the then sick emperor, a fact which the convalescing Caligula would not fail to brutally enforce after regaining his health (Suet., *Cal.* 14.2, 28). Similarly to the above-mentioned *libelli*, the issue of using the inscriptions/posters seems to be a reflection of the means by which the crowd publicly channelled their sentiments about the emperor and games, but also other social problems.¹⁶ The communication existing on the audience-sponsor axis was only a continuation of the type and form of information exchange which was already well-known and regularly applied in the Roman Italy.

The so-called *acclamationes* were the one more official medium which the audience used to communicate with the games' organiser. The *acclamationes* were *dipinti* added to the *edicta munerum*, usually as expressions of thanks and praise to the games' patron. All the available written *acclamationes* come from Pompeii and seem to be an inseparable addition to the previously painted advertisements of the shows. The *acclamationes*' presence near the *edicta* is not accidental. While the *edicta* were painted on the walls of local houses and cemetery tombstones in Pompeii long before the announced games, the *acclamationes* come from periods after the games, and they are the best examples of positive responses and gratitude expressed by the audience for the patron's involvement in organising such a logistically complex entertainment as *munus* or *venatio*. The *acclamationes* usually included the word "*feliciter*" (*CIL* IV 1179, 1190, 7988(c), 7990 and 7991) which was added to the name of the games' sponsor, but there are also other phrases with words of the audience's appreciation (*CIL* IV 1185, 7990, 7989(b)). Taking into account the fact that the *acclamationes* imitated the artistic execution of the *edicta*, and it is possible to identify some of the *acclamationes* as referring to specific *edicta* (e.g., the above-mentioned *CIL* IV 7990), it should be stated that this group of inscriptions was another effective method of the audience's communication with the sponsor of the games.

Despite the limited number of *acclamationes* that survived to the present day, the analysis of this group of inscriptions indicates that local spectators were responsible for employing *scriptores*, professional scribes, to paint

16 Cf. Sage, 1916; see examples of inscriptions, or "posters" encouraging people, e.g., to buy or rent available premises (*CIL* IV 138, 1136, 3878).

them. The assumption that the making of the *acclamation* was a private initiative of some spectators seems to be correct, particularly in the situation when the advertisements of the games were also funded from the *editores*' private money. Had the organisers paid for the games from the money allocated for this purpose by the local *comitium*, they would have acted in the capacity of local officials whose duty, as part of the offices they held, was to invest the financial means of the city in repairing roads, aqueducts, buildings, or giving the shows. When games were held in a city by local officials as part of their work duties, the words of thanks for arranging the event were also of an official nature, usually in the form of inscriptions engraved on stone plaques placed on official buildings and plinths of monuments erected for the games patrons from a given centre, the costs of which were covered by the said town or city (Pobjoy, 2000; Coleman, 2003). However, the *acclamationes* do not have such an official dimension; they are uncomplicated in their artistic execution, and their content is brief and free from any formalities. The *acclamationes* express praise about the *editores*, but their content eludes the rigid convention of inscriptions made according to the rules imposed by the official language based on the conventions known from the monumental thanksgiving plaques. The method of making contact with the *editores* by remaining free from the formal written language allowed the spectators to shorten the social distance existing between an average spectator and the games' organisers who usually originated from the local elites.

The audience's communication via *acclamationes* was most likely also aimed at commemorating the events. Representatives of local communities who could come to watch the shows sponsored by private people used the *acclamationes* to commemorate an event which was special to them. Similarly to the *edicta*, the *acclamationes* were also painted over after some time by *dealbatores*, workers selected for this task, but as long as the inscriptions were visible to passers-by, they extended the celebration of the sponsor's prestige after the success of the shows he had financed. A positive dimension of this type of communication with the *editores* is additionally proven by the fact that all the critical comments about a *spectaculum* that the audience did not necessarily enjoy are exceptionally rare and they can be found only in individually drawn and anonymously made *graffiti*. In turn, there is no evidence of any written messages of a mass character in which the public openly criticised the shows they had watched. This type of criticism was most likely part of an oral, rather than written, exchange of information.¹⁷

17 It can be assumed that *acta diurna* and *acta publica* informed people about unsuccessful games and openly criticised their sponsors. However, the limited evidence on the content and form of

Communication between the game organiser and audience, and *vice versa*, was often spontaneous and depended on a specific situation and a course of the event. This type of communication was never one-dimensional. It consisted of factors such as the patrons' individual emotions and hopes, their enforcement of propaganda in the guise of offered entertainment, but also more general prejudice and criticism typical of larger groups of spectators, on top of the power inherent in the individual's sense of belonging to a crowd. It should be remembered that the communication between the games' sponsors and spectators was an integral part of the entire process of organising the *spectacula*, which normally started long before the event was held and then was maintained long after the show ended. This construct functioned for as long as one of the groups taking part in the exchange of the verbal messages recognised that the other party could be effectively directed toward the emotional reactions that the sender of the message wished to see and hear. Silencing the crowd by the emperor or, conversely, encouraging and inviting people to an enthusiastic reception of the events watched in the theatres or arenas was a method of informing the audience about the expectations the *editor* had regarding the spectators' behaviour.

The spectators' verbal messages addressing the game patron and their comments about the entertainment they had watched were also laced with a need to provoke the sponsor's specific reaction which the spectators, who acted as a harmonious collective and wanted to be beneficial to their needs. However, it is worth mentioning that the oral communication taking place in the course of the event was not always skilfully controlled by one of the parties involved in the exchange of verbal messages. Oral communication often resulted in quite different outcomes than originally planned. An instinctive, volatile, and unpredictable reaction of the audience could also lead to extreme commentaries, which engendered a rather chaotic communication with the *editor*, making its effectiveness highly limited. Additionally, it was difficult to convince disappointed and displeased crowds to regain their enthusiasm, and the lack of the patron's success translated into potential troubles in his ongoing or future career, generating loss of his authority in the eyes of the audience. For the messages marked with emotions were never a guarantee to a lasting rapport between the *editores* and crowds arriving at the games.

The examples of the communication phenomena found in ancient sources suggest that the written method of informing the audience about upcoming shows (in the form of the *edicta munera* as the game

these written accounts does not allow us to make any definitive suggestions about the criticism of the games, the authors of negative commentaries, and the frequency with which disapproval was expressed. Cf. Suet., *Cal.* 8.2.

advertisements and the *libelli* as the game programmes) was the most official medium for communication directed by the games' sponsors to the potential spectators. The audience's response to these written practices and to the games they had watched was offered in the form of *acclamatioes* painted next to the show's advertisements. The effectiveness of this communication depended on the accessibility to the conveyed information. In addition, the exaggerated and often theatrical gestures and manifestations of the patrons' generosity, which determined the principles of the local euergetism, would add to the individual determination of the *editores* to please the crowds. Placing the *edicta* in visible and easily accessible points in and outside of a city facilitated the advertising of the *spectacula*, allowing the sponsors to maintain a long-lasting contact with the audience. Due to the fact that the written forms of communication were naturally more lasting than the ephemeral spoken messages, the audience had enough time to express sincere gratitude to the sponsor via the *acclamatioes*. The written nature of this communication could have been controlled by both parties involved in the process of exchanging the pleasantries, thus avoiding unnecessary verbal squabbling, openly expressed displeasure, and increasingly frustrating disharmony between the patron and his audience. In the context of the ancient Roman games, the culture of written communication provided order in the exchange of information, efficiently upholding the image of success of the shows and their sponsors, which was not always possible in the case of verbal communication.

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CIL IV = *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum, Liber IV, Inscriptiones parietariae Pompeianae Herculenses Stabianae*

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Aelian

Nat. Anim. = *De Natura Animalium*

Aulus Gellius [Au. Gell.]

NA = *Noctes Atticae*

Cassius Dio Cocceianus [Dio]

Cornelius Tacitus [Tac.]

Ann. = *Annales*

- Decimus Iunius Iuvenalis [Iuv.]
Sat. = *Saturae*
- Eusebius of Caesarea [Euseb.]
Hist. Eccl. = *Historia Ecclesiastica*
- Gaius Petronius Arbiter [Petr.]
Sat. = *Satyricon liber*
- Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus [Plin.]
Pan. = *Panegyricus Traiani*
- Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus [Suet.]
Aug. = *Augustus*
Cal. = *Caligula*
Claud. = *Claudius*
Dom. = *Domitian*
Iul. = *Divus Iulius*
Nero = *Nero*
Tib. = *Tiberius*
Tit. = *Titus*
Vit. = *Vitellius*
- Lucius Annaeus Seneca Maior [Sen.]
Contr. = *Controversiae*
- Lucius Anneus Seneca Minor [Sen.]
Epist. = *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium*
- Marcus Tullius Cicero [Cic.]
Att. = *Epistulae ad Atticum*
Fam. = *Epistulae ad familiars*
Phil. = *Philippicae*
- Marcus Valerius Martialis [Mart.]
Spect. = *Liber spectaculorum*
- Martyrium Polycarpi* [Mart. Poly.]
- P. Ovidius Naso [Ovid]
Ars am. = *Ars amatoria*
Passio sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis [Pass. Perp. et. Feli.]
- Publius Papinius Statius [Stat.]
Silv. = *Silvae*
- Publius Vergilius Maro [Verg.]
Aen. = *Aeneid*
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