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Classic Books Revisited

Public Opinion
WALTER LIPPMANN
New York: Macmillan, 1922

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When Walter Lippmann (1889–1974) wrote in his classic work on public opinion that media were instrumental in providing the "pictures in our heads" that were more important than the reality of the "world outside," he was talking primarily about news reporting and print media. Yet, the principles Lippmann identified in 1922 have influenced the study of mass media as they have evolved through radio, television and even the Internet—and they surely can be applied to entertainment media as well as news.

Lippmann's contributions fall into four main areas: (1) an understanding of public opinion's role in democracy, (2) the significance of stereotypes in developing public opinion, (3) the ability of the news media to identify and select news, and (4) the notion that individuals' interpretations or perceptions of reality are mediated or filtered through the media.

His explication of the first of these concerns—the role of public opinion in a democracy—may have earned Lippmann his most uncomfortable place in academic disputations. Although most scholars would trace the concept of "public opinion" to its classical roots in Greece and Rome (Noelle-Neumann and Peterson, 2004), Bernard Hennessy (1975), in his well-known text on public opinion, suggests that the modern study of public opinion dates from Lippmann's work and Lowell's (1913).

Lippmann's view of the role of public opinion in democracy was not an optimistic one. He found it very difficult (maybe impossible) to know the true will of the people in a democracy. "How," he asks, "in the language of democratic theory, do great numbers of people feeling each so privately about so abstract a picture, develop any common will?" (p. 147).

His work is rightly interpreted as having an elitist direction on this point, making a strong case for the undesirability of trusting important policy concerns to the uninformed masses (Blum, 1985; Goodwin, 1995; Steel, 1980). Lippmann's lack of confidence in ordinary people to understand and gain sufficient knowledge about policy issues led him to an outspoken opposition to majority rule and earned him an ongoing dispute with John Dewey.

Dewey declared that Lippmann's book was "perhaps the most effective indictment of democracy as currently conceived ever penned" (Blum, 1984, p. 84). This view of a public as too ill-informed to be trusted with important concerns is still debated today (see Knopf, 1998), and some would argue that the modern research made possible by opinion polling and surveys bears out the notion that the American citizens of the last few decades are no better equipped for their roles in democracy than they were in 1922 (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996).

Whichever side of this debate one takes, it is clear that one of Lippmann's biographers, Ronald Steel, had it right when he remarked that *Public Opinion* "helped spawn whole schools of inquiry, public opinion-polls, academic courses, scholarly journals, even graduate degrees" (1980, p. 180).

One of the most important elements in Lippmann's conception of public opinion was his description of the role of stereotypes. Drawing on his interest in social psychology, he suggested that individuals develop stereotypes as they interpret information, both for the sake of "economy of effort" and as a defense mechanism. While some have criticized Lippmann for his loose usage of the concept of stereotypes

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and failure to define his terms rigorously (Adams, 1977), others have applauded Lippmann's explication of how stereotypes influence an individual's interpretations of information. This has been called "one of his most original contributions to journalism" (Steinberg, 1968, p. 29).

Lippmann's discussion of the ability of the news media to identify and select news is also an important aspect of his continuing contributions to the study of journalism and mass communication.

The news media were central to his explication of how the public receives the information necessary to form opinions. In Lippmann's time, the major news medium was, of course, newspapers, and he believed that "In democratic society … newspapers were the conduits by which information was relayed to the mass of citizens…" (Blum, 1984, p. 169). But, Lippmann believed, the media fail to live up to these needs and responsibilities.

One reason for this failure was rooted in the media's ability to select some events for reporting while leaving others unmentioned. In his widely used book on mass communication theory, Denis McQuail credits Lippmann with providing one of the early definitions of news as that which "obtrudes itself," and thus "attention is directed to that which is noticeable" (2000, p. 338).

One cannot overemphasize the significance of the effect on public opinion of the news media's ability to select some events or issues over others for coverage. In his history of the communication discipline, Everett Rogers calls Lippmann the "most influential single writer about the role of the mass media in shaping public opinion, setting off the research tradition of the agenda-setting process that flourishes today" (Rogers, 1994, p. 233).

Agenda-setting research has staked a clear claim to the notion that, because the media limit and select what to cover and because most people experience the world through some type of media, the media have great influence on what people think is important (Weaver et al., 1981).

Finally, beyond agenda-setting, Lippmann's *Public Opinion* can lay claim to being the antecedent of other important research traditions embodied in the development of the idea that individuals' perceptions of reality are shaped and molded by the interpretations the media put on the events, issues and persons about which they report.

The title of the book's first chapter, "The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads," has been used since its publication in 1922 to describe the belief that people have little direct experience of most of what happens in the world and instead rely on the media's representations of these happenings to form their perceptions (or pictures). What Lippmann believed about the role of newspapers in 1922 seems quite applicable to modern media, as DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach explain in their mass communication theory text: "Lippmann's belief, then, that the press creates pictures in our heads—illusions—and that these serve as knowledge of reality that shapes our conduct, seems consistent with what we know today" (1989, p. 362).

The research traditions spawned by this notion are too numerous for individual discussion here, but clearly this notion has been the guiding principle of many research directions, including the studies of "mediated realities" by Dan Nimmo and James Combs (1983), as well as various approaches to media "framing" (Entman, 1993). The implications of this reality molding have also been extended to international discussions of media theories (Schulz, 1997), including the Spiral of Silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1982; Noelle-Neumann and Peterson, 2004).

Wilbur Schramm, himself an important leader in mass communication research, described Lippmann's book as "still one of the most influential books that modern communication students have inherited from the earlier generation of scholars" (1997, p. 8). The book and its influence will surely be held in the same high regard by several generations yet to come.

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Re-reading Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion* in the 21st century, one is struck by the continuing relevance of many of the key ideas that he discusses. Indeed, in the post-Iraq War context, some of what he has to say gains extra relevance as he dissects not only the shortcomings of the press (for press, now read "media") but also the intentions of those who wish to exercise control over public opinion.

In this short review, I would like to focus on a particular set of issues that Lippmann concentrates on—namely, his analysis of the part the press plays in the creation of the environment within which we exist ("of the world outside and the pictures in our heads"). Other writers have thoroughly discussed the bigger questions Lippmann raises about the challenges to democratic theory posed by his analysis of the press and of public opinion; consequently, they will not be featured here. Not that they are irrelevant to this piece; it is more a matter of focusing on some aspects of the work that speak to us clearly nearly 80 years after it was written.

One of the central issues that *Public Opinion* discusses is how we come to know what we know. Lippmann's answer is straightforward: we rely on the press to provide us with information about an environment of which we have no first-hand knowledge. But this reliance on the press is problematic.

The press is an economic enterprise that works for its own survival, yet "we expect the newspaper to serve us with truth however unprofitable the truth may be. For this difficult and dangerous service, which we recognize as fundamental, we expected to pay until recently the smallest coin turned out by the mint" (p. 203).[1] In other words, we basically want news on the cheap (or for free), yet we rely on the press for our knowledge of our external environment, as a source of information on which we can act and, even more critically, as a key part of the process by which democracies are sustained and expected to thrive.

But if the economic underpinnings of the press create pressures on the news production process, the process by which news itself is collected does not escape Lippmann's attention. It is here perhaps that the book's importance can be most strongly felt.

In simple but critical language, Lippmann carefully dissects the process of news production and the real limitations of the press. And his phrases carry a simple message that we often overlook in our overblown expectations of the press: "news and truth are not the

same thing, and must be clearly distinguished. The function of news is to signalize an event, the function of truth is to bring to light the hidden facts, to set them into relation with each other, and to make a picture of reality on which men can act" (p. 226). Later on in the same paragraph, he reminds us that "there is no defense, no extenuation, no excuse whatever, for stating six times that Lenin is dead [or that Iraq possesses weapons of mass destruction], when the only information the paper possesses is a report that he is dead from a source repeatedly shown to be unreliable" (p. 226).

The need to ask questions about how the press works is a theme that appears throughout the book and, as Lippmann dissects that process, he inevitably touches on the ability of sources to manage that process (for example, via press agents, Chapter 23 of the book) in order to manipulate public opinion. In fact, Lippmann provides a chilling warning (p. 158):

> …the manufacture of consent is capable of great refinements. Within the life of the generation now in control of affairs, persuasion has become a self-conscious art and a regular organ of popular government. None of us begins to understand the consequences, but it is no daring prophecy to say that the knowledge of how to create consent will alter every political calculation and modify every political premise.

Reading these lines in the aftermath of the publication of Lord Hutton's report into the death of the British scientist, Dr. David Kelly, one cannot help but believe that Lippmann's prophesies have come to haunt us: Did the British and US governments deliberately manipulate information to engineer consent? Did the media play their part, as they were expected to do, in the manufacture of consent? Is it possible to "get to the truth" in circumstances where political judgments filter the information available or made available? How can individual citizens exercise rational judgments when the information they depend on is unavailable, imperfect or refracted through political and economic interests?

In essence, what Lippmann draws our attention to is our high expectations of the media to present us with accounts of the world on which we can make decisions. But if there are fundamental problems with the press—its economic underpinnings, its definition of news, its reliance on sources, the potential for manipulation and so on—then our assumptions of what it can do, and what it can do for us, need to be re-examined. We expect it to deliver information about our surrounding world for us to make rational judgments. But news is not truth, as Lippmann observes and, in any case, we spend very little time with the news media. Yet we appear to see no problems in constructing an elaborate theory about the role of the press in the democratic system that is based on nothing more than wishful thinking.

Lippmann therefore challenges us to rethink our ideas about the press and its role in the democratic process. More than this, he asks us to observe and to study the limitations of the press and to think through the consequences of this process of re-evaluation.

In this respect, *Public Opinion* can also be read as a call to develop the study of the media in order to better understand how we come to know our surrounding environment. This is not only the duty of the social scientist, the politician or the concerned citizen but also of educators more generally. For, as Lippmann writes, "until recently, for example, political science was taught in our colleges as if newspapers did not exist … In that science a study of the press and the sources of popular information found no place. It is a curious fact" (p. 203). A curious fact indeed.

Note

[1] Page numbers refer to the 1997 edition of *Public Opinion*, published by The Free Press, New York.

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Walter Lippmann published his classic *Public Opinion* during a period when people were becoming increasingly aware of influence processes. The pervasive power of propaganda had been demonstrated during World War I and subsequently touted in George Creel's *How We Advertised America* (1972 [1920]). Meanwhile, the publicity function was being widely

adopted by organizations (Wilder and Buell, 1923) despite attacks on the function by law-makers (Hallahan, 2004) and by newspaper publishers (Lucarelli, 1993).

Today, *Public Opinion* endures as a classic work for the field of public relations because of Lippmann's astute insights into the processes of influence and public opinion, his insightful explanation for the emergence of public relations and his important influence on early public relations thinkers such as Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays.

"Pictures Inside Our Heads"

Lippmann's insights about public opinion processes were clearly ahead of his time. A graduate of Harvard, Lippmann worked as secretary to muck-raking journalist Lincoln Steffens before he co-founded (with Herbert Croly) *New Republic* magazine, and he later became a senior editor at the *New York World.*

Lippmann was a journalist first and foremost—not a social scientist. But he drew heavily upon his liberal education, where he was exposed to writers such as William James, to propose ideas that would resurface in the social sciences as concepts that would be labeled symbolic interactionism, relativism, constructivism and cognitive schemata. All have found their way into modern public relations theory and practice.

Perhaps the most important of Lippmann's ideas was his differentiation between objective reality (or what he termed the "world outside") and the subjective reality created by "the pictures in our heads." In an era dominated by modernistic facticity and reasoned thought, Lippmann proposed that public opinion ought to be analyzed "by recognizing the triangular relationship between the scene of action, the human picture of that scene, and the human response to that picture working itself upon the scene of action" (p. 11).[1]

He explained: "A report is the joint product of the knower and known, in which the role of the observer is always selective and creative. The facts we see depend upon where we are placed, and the habits of our eyes" (p. 54). Lippmann went on to observe, "For the most part we do not first see and then define; we define and then see. In the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world, we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture" (pp. 54–5).

For today's public relations practitioner, Lippmann's observations paint a backdrop for understanding public relations strategies. Lippmann said people's knowledge of the outside world was shaped by the control of information—resulting from censorship and the penchant for privacy. People's pictures of the world also were shaped by their sphere of contacts and opportunities to become exposed, by their time and attentional limitations, and by the speed and clarity of information exchanges. Stereotypes were useful and necessary if people were to cope with the onslaught of information in their daily lives.

"In putting together our public opinions, not only do we have to picture more space than we can see with our eyes, and more time than we can feel, but we have to describe and judge more people, more actions, more things than we can ever count, or vividly imagine. We have to summarize and generalize. We have to pick samples and treat them as typical" (p. 95).

The Press Agent as a Shaper of Public Opinion

Lippmann observed that people don't become interested or moved by things they cannot see. Ideas must be abstracted and become animated—processes that occur through a variety of communication modes: speeches, plays, motion pictures, cartoons, artworks and of course, news (p. 104). Lippmann focused particular attention on newsmen, but clearly did not think that the public should rely upon journalists as molders of public opinion. Instead, "public opinions must be organized for the press if they are to be sound" (p. 18).

Lippmann did not specifically list press agents—the popular term of the day for public relations professionals—as one of the various artisans who help the public visualize ideas. Yet his views about their importance are clear.

In that regard, Lippmann represented a sharp divergence from the scorn heaped upon publicists by journalists during this period.

"The development of the publicity man is a clear sign that the facts of modern life do not spontaneously take a shape in which they can be known," Lippmann opined. "They must be given a shape by somebody, and since in the daily routine reporters cannot give a shape to facts, and since there is little disinterested organization of intelligence, the need for some formulation is being met by the interested parties" (p. 218).

For Lippmann, publicity was an important force in public opinion—the antithesis of censorship and privacy. He wrote:

"The enormous discretion as to what facts and what impression shall be reported is steadily convincing every organized group of people to that whether it wishes to secure publicity, or to avoid it, the exercise of discretion cannot be left to the reporter. It is safer to hire a press agent who stands between the group and the newspapers. Having hired him, the temptation to exploit his strategic position is very great" (p. 217).

Separately, he noted: "The good press agent understands that the virtues of his cause are not news, unless they are such strange virtues that they jut right out of the routine of life. This is not because the newspapers do not like virtue, but because it is not worth while [cq] to say that nothing has happened when nobody expected anything to happen." This underscored the distinction Lippmann later made between *news* and *truth* (p. 226).

Impact on Early Public Relations Thought

Lippmann's book sparked considerable public debate. In particular, Lippmann's pessimism prompted John Dewey to defend many of the democratic notions that Lippmann appeared to question—including the importance of public debate and participation (Bybee, 1999; Dewey, 1927). Dewey's resulting analysis, in turn, influenced the public relations field's use of the term *public* to denote a group that faces and recognizes a similar problem and then organizes to solve it (Grunig and Hunt, 1984, pp. 143–4).

But Lippmann also clearly influenced the thinking of two of America's earliest public relations thinkers and practitioners—Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays.

Lee, a former newspaperman who had practiced publicity since the turn of the century, had already outlined many of his core philosophies well before publication of *Public Opinion*. Lee was a strong advocate of organizations taking into account the interests of publics, of gaining positive press coverage to court favor and of dealing honestly and openly with the public by providing them accurate and factual information (Hallahan, 2002). However, in several of his most important speeches during the mid-1920s, Lee drew upon Lippmann to point out the public's lack of interest in public affairs. Lee emphasized to clients that their policies and practices must be of sufficient interest and importance to the public interest to make news (Hiebert, 1966, pp. 304–5; Lee, 1924/1925, pp. 19–21).

Lippmann especially influenced Bernays, who takes credit for having coined the term *public relations counsel*. Bernays also used his own book *Crystallizing Public Opinion*—published only a year after Lippmann—to promulgate his new ideas about public relations to business managers who then were thirsting to learn about persuading the public.

A careful reading of Bernays reveals more than a dozen excerpts and references to *Public Opinion*. Bernays, for example, cited Lippmann's discussion of the role of the press agent as justification for the rise of the public relations counsel (1923, pp. 55, 194). Bernays pointed to the value of stereotypes (1923, pp. 98–9) and cited Lippmann in explaining the importance of "overt acts" or events that trigger coverage (1923, pp. 56, 191–2). Bernays' description of the importance and workings of newspapers also drew heavily on Lippmann's descriptions (1923, pp. 72, 75, 116–7).

Bernays can be credited for early efforts to frame public relations as an effort to influence *public opinion* and *groups*, not merely individual behaviors. (This emphasis is juxtaposed to the emphasis on influencing *individual* consumer

behaviors found in modern advertising theory.) Bernays clearly echoed Lippmann's views on the power to influence public opinion (e.g., 1923, p. 125). Notably, Bernays included in his own book Lippmann's observation that "the most significant revolution of modern times is not industrial or economic or political, but the revolution which is taking place in the art of *creating consent* among the governed … None of us begins to understand the consequences, but it is no daring prophecy to say that knowing how to *create consent* will alter every political premise" (1923, p. 38, emphasis added). In Lippmann, Bernays found a term he would popularize—"the engineering of consent" (Bernays, 1955; Tilson et al., 2002).

Lippmann lamented the lack of extensive literature on public opinion, but Bernays didn't miss a step when he positioned the public relations counselor as an expert in understanding groups and their opinions and how to reach them. Bernays' classic definition described the public relations counselor as a consultant who both interprets public opinion to his client but also helps interpret his client to the public and thus molds client actions and public opinion (1923, p. 57).

Lippmann clearly questioned elements of modern democracy, including the readiness of the public to delegate decision-making to others and the potential misuse of symbols by government officials. He noted that symbols are the means "by which in the short run the mass escapes from its own inertia, the inertia of indecision, or the inertia of headlong movement, and is rendered capable of being led along the zigzag of a complex situation" (p. 153).

Bernays similarly described how symbols could be created that appeal to the human instincts and universal desires (1923, p. 172; Lippmann, p. 160). Of course, Bernays also applied psychoanalytical ideas espoused by his famous uncle, Sigmund Freud. Bernays' famous "Torches of Freedom" campaign—where young women walked in the 1929 Easter Parade holding cigarettes in defiance of the taboo against women smoking in public—was a classic example of applying this principle.

Note

[1] Page numbers refer to the 1965 edition of *Public Opinion*, published by Macmillan Free Press, New York.

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