

## Walter Lippmann and John Dewey

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### Introduction

In the 1920s, Lippmann (in his 20s) was a journalist and social commentator who dined with presidents and occasionally wrote their speeches. Dewey (in his 60s) was a philosopher at Columbia University. The period was one in which there was growing belief in the fundamentally irrational nature of humankind, and doubts about the nature and possibility of a democracy that could be something more than rule by mob or demagoguery

Lippmann argued for an intellectual elite that would apply scientific management to democracy, in order to tame it. His philosophy was a blend of liberalism and elitism. Dewey, on the other hand, had a lot of time for Science, did not see Science as standing outside of and above human existence – for him, scientific knowledge was human-made knowledge. The problems of democracy were to do with bureaucratization and impersonalization of industrial life, from the power of economic forces to secure their interests in government either directly through compulsion or threat, or indirectly through the manipulation of public opinion. The cure was a system of communication that connected with citizenship and the press. For Dewey, the answer to the problems of democracy was *a more participatory form of democracy*.

### Lippmann's 1922 Book, "Public Opinion"

In his 1922 book, "Public Opinion", Lippmann argued that people do not know the world directly, but only as a "picture in their heads"; consequently, they responded to a "pseudo-environment" in their political judgments. To know the world, people need maps of the world, but Lippmann asks: how can people be sure that the maps on which they rely have not been drawn by special interests? Most maps are of that kind. How can there be democratic government that does not fall into irrationality as a result of power struggles between self-interested factions?

Among the factors that lead to perceptual distortions (on the part of the average person) of the real world were: censorship, limitations of social contact, insufficient time to study public affairs, the necessity for communicators to express complex events in very short messages, and fear of threatening facts, as well as preconceptions, prejudices, and stereotypes. How was it possible to overcome these limitations in a democracy so that people can come to a rational, objectively based understanding of the world, and a common will?

Traditional democratic theory has no proper answer to the question as to how it is possible, in these circumstances, for people to arrive at a "common will" that can be called "public opinion". In reality, public opinion does not arise from the people, but it is *created*, in a process that was supposed to have died out with the advent of democracy, namely, the "manufacture of consent". This process has become even more sophisticated because it is now based on analysis, drawing on psychological research, and coupled with the power of communication. It works by the creation of *symbols* onto which each citizen can project his or her own needs and desires.

The power of symbols rest, says Lippmann on the irrational character of human emotions, coupled with the

ambiguity of symbols themselves. Symbols can be pictures, representations, words or slogans.

Traditional democratic theory assumes that people are naturally endowed for self-government. The people, in this theory, are informed by the press. There are three problems with these assumptions that have to do with: *the nature of the public, the nature of the press, and the organizational structure of news*. The people are fundamentally selfish, interested in themselves, and the press simply feeds to this selfishness and self-interest. Furthermore, the people are not interested enough in being informed that they are prepared to pay the true price for reliable information, so they are content to purchase papers at very low cost, increasing newspapers' dependence on advertising which, in its turn, further subverts the independence and reliability of the news that is provided. The press sees the reader as more a target for advertising than as a citizen in a democracy. To be sure of gathering together a sufficient number of people to be of interest to advertisers, the newspapers serve up a news diet that fits within the existing range of expectations and stereotypes of the reader, emphasizing, for example, local news over national, national over international and so on. In any case there is also a problem with news, which simply signals events but does not explain them in their full complexity and context. What news the newspapers choose to select is as much based on convenience (time and effort required) as on the public importance of events. Convenience leads the press to undue dependence on "press agents" (i.e. lobbyists, public relations people etc.). We should therefore not confuse "news" with "truth".

Lippmann then argues that in order to save democracy from these limitations, what is needed is the development of intelligence divisions supporting the various agencies of government, staffed by social scientists, preparing the knowledge that is needed by decision-makers. Subject to various checks and balances, power should be invested in a few men of action, public policy analysts and political leaders. In any case, Lippmann argues, the point of democracy is not the pleasure of engaging in self-government, but about achieving the "good life", in other words, the *results* of government.

### **Dewey's Reaction to Lippmann's Book**

Dewey shared some of Lippmann's basic concerns: nationalism, economic self-interest, the management of public opinion and the "capacity for a new and dangerous alliance among powerful, elite interests in business, government and the news". But unlike Lippmann, Dewey was also concerned about the class divisions that had been brought about by industrial capitalism, which he felt were contrary to the ethics of democracy. Democracy was recognition of the fundamentally social and interdependent nature of human existence. The core of democratic politics was the effort to create the conditions for individuals in a society to develop to their fullest potential. *It was not just political; it was also civil and industrial*. That is to say, democracy was an ethic, not just a machine, and it extended to the workplace. Dewey believed that the press could be reformed, and that it must continue to serve as a vital link between government and the people. He distrusted Lippmann's notion of a new aristocracy of administrators because he thought they would become a self-interested power block in their own right, and that the creation of such a power block in itself as fundamentally undemocratic.

### **Lippmann's Next Book, "The Phantom Public"**

Here, Lippmann reasserts his despair at the possibility that the average person can have sensible opinions on public affairs, or that the aggregate of opinions that are ill-informed can add up to a sensible opinion. Government was best left to a few informed men of action, divided into a group that is *In power* and a group that is *Out of power*. The public's role is to vote at regular intervals on who should be In and who

should be Out.

In this book, Lippmann not only rejects the possibility of a truly unified society, but also even abandons his belief that there is any privileged epistemology, be it Science or otherwise, that can provide human beings with an independent guide to the conduct of human affairs. Thus his thinking reflected the relativity of knowledge claimed by Nietzsche, the irrationality of consciousness proposed by Freud, and the instability of even “scientific knowledge” implied in the work of Einstein.

The deep problem for democracy is that there is no such entity as “the people” or the “public”. But the idea that the “people” rule, does at least soften the actions of government. The goal of government can only be “workable adjustment” to change and crisis. The role of the masses in their guise as the “public” can only be as spectators who, though their determination of which group of the elite is “In” and which is “Out”, help minimize the potential for violent conflict among the elites.

### **Dewey’s Reaction to Lippmann’s “Phantom Public”**

Dewey agreed with Lippmann that the public is not capable of efficient executive action, that its role is not to govern, but to intervene at critical junctures through the voting system; indeed, Dewey thought it unlikely that spokesmen for democracy ever intended much more than that. Furthermore, the danger of the pretense of a cohesive public is that it allows a few insiders to govern in their own interests while pretending to be agents of the public will. But, he goes on, even in order for the public to intervene only at critical junctures, it still needs to do so on the basis of more effective group activity, and impartial information, than it currently does.

Whereas Lippmann gives up on the public, therefore, Dewey turns towards it. It is not only the public, he points out, that can be accused of being irrational. Countless leaders have also abused power and demonstrated irrational action. Democracy is not a guarantee against the abuse of power, but neither is it the cause of abuse.

### **Dewey’s “The Public and its Problems”**

Dewey further developed his arguments in lectures and publications through the later 1920s (“The Public and its Problems”, 1927; “Experience and Nature”, 1925 and “The Quest for Certainty” 1929).

Lippmann and his followers (the “democratic realists”) had asserted (1) the fundamental irrationality of men and women, and (2) believed that the minimization of participation of the masses in public life was consequently a necessary goal, coming to (3) redefine democracy as rule for the people, but not by the people, through the application of scientific principles.

Dewey believed that democracy was a developmental process, and although he conceded that there were certainly problems with democracy in the 1920s, he did not think it should be abandoned and substituted by a system of rule by scientific experts. He did not agree with Lippmann that the public had never existed; rather, it was simply in ‘eclipse’ at that time, but at various points through history, the public had come to full recognition of itself. The public’s fundamental character, Dewey says, is not irrationality, but its social existence – the product of human association of those who appreciate that the consequences of action have an impact outside of their own immediate experience. The public may lose track of its shared interests, but always has the potential to reform itself when it becomes aware of its inevitable interdependencies.

Dewey sees government arising directly from the public. The public forms agencies for the purpose of taking charge of the overall consequences of the activities of the public. The government is the outcome of the public's efforts to manage its interactions. The public's primary problem is to develop a system for the selection of official representatives and to determine their responsibilities and rights. As democracy has developed it has spawned key concepts that reflect back to the public its growing awareness of itself, concepts such as the nature of the individual and individual rights, of freedom and authority, progress, order, liberty, law etc. The movement to democracy is built into the social character of existence. The need is not to invent a definition of democracy, but to discover its definition as a practice. We can ask, therefore, what interests was the public trying to achieve in repeatedly moving in the direction of political democracy? The answer includes such things as acquiring a responsible share in forming and directing the activities of groups to which one belongs; liberation of the potentialities of members of a group in harmony with the interests and goods which are common; and so on. Dewey sees democracy as the embodiment of community itself; it is not an ideal towards which society is moving, but rather a tendency built into the very structure of social activity. In reply to Lippmann, therefore, Dewey argued that Lippmann had fundamentally misunderstood the nature of democracy.

The problems of democracy, says Dewey, are not due to the impossibility of a public, but due to the fact that new forces in society such as technology, and capitalism, have so restructured human relations that the public has lost its sense of itself. Science is not the answer, but helping the public recover itself.

### **Lippmann and Dewey on Science**

Concepts such as "indeterminacy" (which holds that the method of observation influences what is observed) and "relativity" deprived Lippmann of a sure foundation for a Science of democracy. For Dewey, however, developments in science were an inspiration. For human beings, the capacity to engage in reflective thought provided the best means to cope with uncertainty. While Science, through cognitive experience, could offer a measure of certainty at the expense of ignoring individual or unique experiences, *aesthetic* experience focused on individual and unique experiences. The world was divided between what was known and controllable (the everyday) and what was beyond human knowledge and control (the aesthetic or religious). Science in his day, Dewey believed, had cut the world off from any source of value.

Faced with a choice between the world of Science, and the world of mushy, other-worldly conceptions such as "liberty" and "equality", Lippmann had opted for Science as the best means of minimizing violence in society. Dewey did not believe a choice was necessary. He felt that Science had gotten out of hand, had forgotten its direct relationship with human experience and its role as servant to human interests. He argued that society must abandon the claims of *reason* and replace them with the judgement of *intelligence*. Intelligence recognizes that knowledge is always value-based. Science proceeds on the basis of shared knowledge. Science, understood as Intelligence, as a social product of community life, would also seek control that is directed by "that common understanding and thorough communication which is the precondition of the existence of a genuine public". It would be the interests of the public as a community which would guide science, and the experiences of people in the community which would form the judgement as to the consequences of the knowledge. The test of the value of knowledge is not in its ability to control nature or people, but in its capacity to realize the values of the public as judged by the public.

### **Lippmann and Dewey on Communication and Democracy**

Lippmann had downgraded the value of the press to democracy. Dewey saw the press as having both an epistemological role in helping to define what will be taken as truth, and a moral role in providing an everyday answer to the apparent contradiction between the interests of the individual and society. For a public to act as a public it requires free and open communication so that it can inform itself of current affairs, and debate the consequences of individual and group behaviors. Through communication, individuals are able to judge their values in terms of the shared interests of the public. Communication facilitates shared experience, through socially-constituted language.

The only purpose of government, said Dewey, is to represent the interests of the public. The press is essential for keeping the public in touch with itself, and with the actions of those who govern in its name. The purpose of news is not just to inform but to make public ideas, including the results of scientific inquiry so that they may be debated and judged according to the needs and interests of the community. The press has a role in helping determine what will be taken as our shared understanding of the social world.

### **Lippmann, Dewey and the Decline of Facts**

Lippmann feared the consequences of bias, of the limitations of ‘facts’ in revealing the world, and the distorting power of the ways in which ‘facts’ are organized to serve particular interests, the relativity of knowledge etc. But none the less, he upheld the usefulness in journalism of dividing ‘opinion’ from ‘fact’ (‘science’ from ‘values’) and the science of objectivity (even though he had ceased believing in science as savior). For Dewey, on the other hand, the relativity of truth was to be celebrated because it called attention to the problem of authority in determining what will be called the truth. The test for truth must be in its consequences for people, and judged by the people who experience those consequences. To pretend that science was some form of independent knowledge divorced from the interests or concerns of the people, established the conditions for the powerful to use science for their own interests. Public opinion could be engineered by playing down the “public” in the formation of that opinion.

### **Commentary**

With respect to the implications of their respective thoughts for mass communications, Lippmann, in his critique of the press, seems not to have appreciated the diverse range of different forms of news in society. And although it is certain that news is beset by the problems which he identifies, Lippmann seems not to recognize any shades of grey, or the possibility that across a range of different media, ideas and perspectives may surface that in aggregate provide a higher quality representation of the world than is achieved in any one medium.

Dewey, on the other hand, in recognizing the limitations of the ‘pursuit of facts’ and the ‘ideology of objectivity’ and nonetheless celebrating the importance of the press for the formation and maintenance of publics, one that functions for the public to come to knowledge of, and to express itself, does not show us what such a press would actually look like, or how the rules of organizing such a press would not in some ways privilege the power of those who own and control newspapers and their favored interests.