

Public Opinion, Walter Lipmann, 1922.

Dear students (this is Dr Oelze writing the text in Italics),

This text is fundamental in understanding the how democracy came to be “hacked” through print media in the early twentieth century. Lippman opens the book by explaining that the “world as it really exists” is different than the world “in each of our heads.” The world that exists in our heads is what we believe about the world, whether or not it is true. This is the sum total of our beliefs, prejudices, fears, political partisan commitments, etc. We think it is reality, but really it is what we have constructed from experience and consumed from the media (and from local authorities such as parents and teachers). Lipmann’s book looks at the important role of media in that process of creating your interior “world.” In his time, we are talking about mostly newspapers and magazines. Later it would become radio, then television, now internet). Men and women, he says, fight wars, work in factories, and vote based on the “world in their heads” — and that means media is really powerful in shaping the world.

The text introduces the concept of the “buying public” who wants truth but also thinks they can and should have access to it for free or for the smallest price of a dollar-paper. But truth is not cheap. What does come when you pay a low price is “news” provided by companies that want to own the minds of the buying public. You will read about that in the chapter excerpted below. The larger book also introduced the term “the manufacture of consent” — once media outlets can get the minds of the buying public, they can manufacture consent just as a factory makes any consumer product. Media outlets either turn out the “product” of “misinformation” or they just limit information so it dominates the market whether that is what you wanted to buy or not.

The book is written by a scholar in the 1920s, so it has comparisons and references to a world of knowledge, and is a bit of a challenge. So I selected the most important paragraphs from the introduction and from chapter 21. Then I bolded the critical points from the intro, and I also put in some questions for your reflection. We will talk about them in class.

I encourage you to read more of the book, which is available online for free at:

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper2/CDFinal/Lippman/contents.html>

Chapter 1: Introduction:

Looking back we can see how indirectly we know the environment in which nevertheless we live. We can see that the news of it comes to us now fast, now

slowly; but that whatever we believe to be a true picture, we treat as if it were the environment itself.

Case Study #1:

(The role of newspapers in making Congressman upset with the proposed “League of Nations” in the wake of WWI. This was early “fake news.”)

At breakfast on the morning of September 29, 1919, some of the Senators read a news dispatch in the *Washington Post* about the landing of American marines on the Dalmatian coast. The newspaper said:

(*Headline: FACTS NOW ESTABLISHED*)

"The following important facts appear already *established*. The orders to Rear Admiral Andrews commanding the American naval forces in the Adriatic, came from the British Admiralty via the War Council and Rear Admiral Knapps in London. The approval or disapproval of the American Navy Department was not asked....

(*Headline: WITHOUT DANIELS' KNOWLEDGE*)

"Mr. Daniels was admittedly placed in a peculiar position when cables reached here stating that the forces over which he is presumed to have exclusive control were carrying on what amounted to naval warfare without his knowledge. It was fully realized that the *British Admiralty might desire to issue orders to Rear Admiral Andrews* to act on behalf of Great Britain and her Allies, because the situation required sacrifice on the part of some nation if D'Annunzio's followers were to be held in check.

"It was further realized that *under the new league of nations plan foreigners would be in a position to direct American Naval forces in emergencies* with or without the consent of the American Navy Department...." etc. (Italics mine).

The first Senator to comment is Mr. Knox of Pennsylvania. Indignantly he demands investigation. In Mr. Brandegee of Connecticut, who spoke next, indignation has already stimulated credulity. Where Mr. Knox indignantly wishes to know if the report is true, Mr. Brandegee, a half a minute later, would like to know what would have happened if marines had been killed. Mr. Knox, interested in the question, forgets that he asked for an inquiry, and replies. If American marines had been killed, it would be war. The mood of the debate is

still conditional. Debate proceeds. Mr. McCormick of Illinois reminds the Senate that the Wilson administration is prone to the waging of small unauthorized wars. He repeats Theodore Roosevelt's quip about "waging peace." More debate. Mr. Brandegee notes that the marines acted "under orders of a Supreme Council sitting somewhere," but he cannot recall who represents the United States on that body. The Supreme Council is unknown to the Constitution of the United States. Therefore Mr. New of Indiana submits a resolution calling for the facts.

So far the Senators still recognize vaguely that they are discussing a rumor. Being lawyers they still remember some of the forms of evidence. But as red-blooded men they already experience all the indignation which is appropriate to the fact that American marines have been ordered into war by a foreign government and without the consent of Congress. Emotionally they want to believe it, because they are Republicans fighting the League of Nations. This arouses the Democratic leader, Mr. Hitchcock of Nebraska. He defends the Supreme Council: it was acting under the war powers. Peace has not yet been concluded because the Republicans are delaying it. Therefore the action was necessary and legal. Both sides now assume that the report is true, and the conclusions they draw are the conclusions of their partisanship. Yet this extraordinary assumption is in a debate over a resolution to investigate the truth of the assumption. It reveals how difficult it is, even for trained lawyers, to suspend response until the returns are in. The response is instantaneous. The fiction is taken for truth because the fiction is badly needed.

A few days later an official report showed that the marines were not landed by order of the British Government or of the Supreme Council. They had not been fighting the Italians. They had been landed at the request of the Italian Government to protect Italians, and the American commander had been officially thanked by the Italian authorities. The marines were not at war with Italy. They had acted according to an established international practice which had nothing to do with the League of Nations.

Worldwide concentration of this kind on a symbolic personality is rare enough to be clearly remarkable, and every author has a weakness for the striking and irrefutable example. The vivisection of war reveals such examples, but it does not make them out of nothing. In a more normal public life, symbolic pictures

are no less governant of behavior, but each symbol is far less inclusive because there are so many competing ones. Not only is each symbol charged with less feeling because at most it represents only a part of the population, but even within that part there is infinitely less suppression of individual difference. The symbols of public opinion, in times of moderate security, are subject to check and comparison and argument. They come and go, coalesce and are forgotten, never organizing perfectly the emotion of the whole group. There is, after all, just one human activity left in which whole populations accomplish the union sacrée. It occurs in those middle phases of a war when fear, pugnacity, and hatred have secured complete dominion of the spirit, either to crush every other instinct or to enlist it, and before weariness is felt...

The only feeling that anyone can have about an event he does not experience is the feeling aroused by his mental image of that event. That is why until we know what others think they know, we cannot truly understand their acts....

The war, of course, furnished many examples of this pattern: the **casual fact**, the **creative imagination**, the **will to believe**, and out of these three elements, a counterfeit of reality to which there was a violent instinctive response. For it is clear enough that under certain conditions men respond as powerfully to fictions as they do to realities, and that in many cases they help to create the very fictions to which they respond. Let him cast the first stone who did not believe in the Russian army that passed through England in August, 1914, did not accept any tale of atrocities without direct proof, and never saw a plot, a traitor, or a spy where there was none. Let him cast a stone who never passed on as the real inside truth what he had heard someone say who knew no more than he did.

In all these instances we must note particularly one common factor. It is the insertion between man and his environment of a pseudo-environment. To that pseudo-environment his behavior is a response. But because it *is* behavior, the consequences, if they are acts, operate not in the pseudo-environment where the behavior is stimulated, but in the real environment where action eventuates. If the behavior is not a practical act, but what we call roughly thought and emotion, it may be a long time before there is any noticeable break in the texture of the fictitious world. But when the stimulus of the pseudo-fact results in action on things or other people, contradiction soon develops. Then comes the sensation of butting one's head against a stone wall, of learning by experience, and witnessing Herbert Spencer's tragedy of the murder of a Beautiful Theory by a Gang of Brutal Facts, the discomfort in short of a

maladjustment. For certainly, at the level of social life, what is called the adjustment of man to his environment takes place through the medium of fictions.

By fictions I do not mean lies. I mean a representation of the environment which is in lesser or greater degree made by man himself. The range of fiction extends all the way from complete hallucination to the scientists' perfectly self-conscious use of a schematic model, or his decision that for his particular problem accuracy beyond a certain number of decimal places is not important. A work of fiction may have almost any degree of fidelity, and so long as the degree of fidelity can be taken into account, fiction is not misleading. In fact, human culture is very largely the selection, the rearrangement, the tracing of patterns upon, and the stylizing of, what William James called "the random irradiations and resettlements of our ideas." (8) The alternative to the use of fictions is direct exposure to the ebb and flow of sensation. That is not a real alternative, for however refreshing it is to see at times with a perfectly innocent eye, innocence itself is not wisdom, though a source and corrective of wisdom. For the real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance. We are not equipped to deal with so much subtlety, so much variety, so many permutations and combinations. And although we have to act in that environment, we have to reconstruct it on a simpler model before we can manage with it. To traverse the world men must have maps of the world.

Thesis and Organization of Book:

Those features of the world outside which have to do with the behavior of other human beings, in so far as that behavior crosses ours, is dependent upon us, or is interesting to us, we call roughly **public affairs**. The pictures inside the heads of these human beings, the pictures of themselves, of others, of their needs, purposes, and relationship, are their public opinions. **Those pictures which are acted upon by groups of people, or by individuals acting in the name of groups, are Public Opinion with capital letters.** And so in the chapters which follow we shall inquire first into some of the reasons why the picture inside so often misleads men in their dealings with the world outside. Under this heading we shall consider first the **chief factors which limit their access to the facts**. They are the artificial censorships, the limitations of social contact, the comparatively meager time available in each day for paying attention to public affairs, the distortion arising because events have to be

compressed into very short messages, the difficulty of making a small vocabulary express a complicated world, and finally the fear of facing those facts which would seem to threaten the established routine of men's lives.

The analysis then turns from these more or less external limitations to the question of **how this trickle of messages from the outside is affected by the stored up images, the preconceptions, and prejudices which interpret, fill them out, and in their turn powerfully direct the play of our attention, and our vision itself.** From this it proceeds to examine how in the individual person the limited messages from outside, formed into a pattern of stereotypes, are identified with his own interests as he feels and conceives them. In the succeeding sections it examines how opinions are crystallized into what is called Public Opinion, how a National Will, a Group Mind, a Social Purpose, or whatever you choose to call it, is formed.

The first five parts constitute the descriptive section of the book. There follows an analysis of the traditional democratic theory of public opinion. The substance of the argument is that democracy in its original form never seriously faced the problem which arises because the pictures inside people's heads do not automatically correspond with the world outside. And then, because the democratic theory is under criticism by socialist thinkers, there follows an examination of the most advanced and coherent of these criticisms, as made by the English Guild Socialists. My purpose here is to find out whether these reformers take into account the main difficulties of public opinion. My conclusion is that they ignore the difficulties, as completely as did the original democrats, because they, too, assume, and in a much more complicated civilization, that somehow mysteriously there exists in the hearts of men a knowledge of the world beyond their reach.

I argue that representative government, either in what is ordinarily called politics, or in industry, cannot be worked successfully, no matter what the basis of election, unless there is an **independent, expert organization for making the unseen facts intelligible to those who have to make the decisions.** I attempt, therefore, to argue that the serious acceptance of the principle that personal representation must be supplemented by representation of the unseen facts would alone permit a satisfactory decentralization, and allow us to escape from the intolerable and unworkable fiction that each of us must acquire a competent opinion about all public affairs. It is argued that the problem of the press is confused because the critics and the apologists expect the press to realize this fiction, expect it to make up for all that was not foreseen in the theory of democracy, and that the readers expect this miracle to be performed at

no cost or trouble to themselves. The newspapers are regarded by democrats as a panacea for their own defects, whereas analysis of the nature of news and of the economic basis of journalism seems to show that the newspapers necessarily and inevitably reflect, and therefore, in greater or lesser measure, intensify, the defective organization of public opinion. My conclusion is that public opinions must be organized for the press if they are to be sound, not by the press as is the case today. This organization I conceive to be in the first instance the task of a political science that has won its proper place as formulator, in advance of real decision, instead of apologist, critic, or reporter after the decision has been made. I try to indicate that the perplexities of government and industry are conspiring to give political science this enormous opportunity to enrich itself and to serve the public. And, of course, I hope that these pages will help a few people to realize that opportunity more vividly, and therefore to pursue it more consciously.

What do you think that Lippman means by an “independent, expert organization.” Is he supporting the “manufacture of consent” or is he against it? Or neither?

Take 10 minutes to summarize these ideas. Write the summary in complete sentences.

CHAPTER 21: THE BUYING PUBLIC

1

The idea that men have to go forth and study the world in order to govern it, has played a very minor part in political thought. It could figure very little, because the machinery for reporting the world in any way useful to government made comparatively little progress from the time of Aristotle to the age in which the premises of democracy were established. Therefore, if you had asked a pioneer democrat where the information was to come from on which the will of the people was to be based, he would have been puzzled by the question. It would have seemed a little as if you had asked him where his life or his soul came from.

The will of the people, he almost always assumed, exists at all times; the duty of political science was to work out the inventions of the ballot and representative government. If they were properly worked out and applied under the right conditions, such as exist in the self-contained village or the self-contained shop, the mechanism would somehow overcome the brevity of attention which Aristotle had observed, and the narrowness of its range, which the theory of a self-contained community tacitly acknowledged. We have seen how even at this late date the guild socialists are transfixed by the notion that if only you can build on the right unit of voting and representation, an intricate cooperative commonwealth is possible. Convinced that the wisdom was there if only you could find it, democrats have treated the problem of making public opinions as a problem in civil liberties.¹ "Who ever knew Truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter?"² Supposing that no one has ever seen it put to the worse, are we to believe then that the truth is generated by the encounter, like fire by rubbing two sticks? Behind this classic doctrine of liberty, which American democrats embodied in their Bill of Rights, there are, in fact, several different theories of the origin of truth. One is a faith that in the competition of opinions, the truest will win because there is a peculiar strength in the truth. This is probably sound if you allow the competition to extend over a sufficiently long time. When men argue in this vein they have in mind the verdict of history, and they think specifically of heretics persecuted when they lived, canonized after they were dead. Milton's question rests also on a belief that the capacity to recognize truth is inherent in all men, and that truth freely put in circulation will win acceptance. It derives no less from the experience, which has shown that men are not likely to discover truth if they cannot speak it, except under the eye of an uncomprehending policeman.

No one can possibly overestimate the practical value of these civil liberties, nor the importance of maintaining them. When they are in jeopardy, the human spirit is in jeopardy, and should there come a time when they have to be curtailed, as during a war, the suppression of thought is a risk to civilization which might prevent its recovery from the effects of war, if the hysterics, who exploit the necessity, were numerous enough to carry over into peace the taboos of war. Fortunately, the mass of men is too tolerant long to enjoy the professional inquisitors, as gradually, under the criticism of men not willing to be terrorized, they are revealed as mean-spirited creatures who nine-tenths of the time do not know what they are talking about.³ But in spite of its fundamental importance, civil liberty in this sense does not guarantee public opinion in the modern world. For it always assumes, either that truth is spontaneous, or that the means of securing truth exist when there is no external interference. But when you are dealing with an invisible environment, the assumption is false. The truth about distant or complex matters is not self-evident, and the machinery for assembling information is technical and expensive. Yet political science, and especially democratic political science, has never freed itself from the original assumption of Aristotle's politics sufficiently to restate the premises, so that political thought might come to grips with the problem of how to make the invisible world visible to the citizens of a modern state. So deep is the tradition, that until quite recently, for example, political science was taught in our colleges as if newspapers did not exist. I am not referring to schools of journalism, for they are trade schools, intended to prepare men and women for a career. I am referring to political science as expounded to future business men, lawyers, public officials, and citizens at large. In that science a study of the press and the sources of popular information found no place. It is a curious fact. To anyone not immersed in the routine interests of political science, it is almost inexplicable that no American student of government, no American sociologist, has ever written a book on news-gathering. There are occasional references to the press, and statements that it is not, or that it ought to be, "free" and "truthful." But I can find almost nothing else. And this disdain of the professionals finds its counterpart in public opinions. Universally it is admitted that the press is the chief means of contact with the unseen environment. And practically everywhere it is assumed that the press should do spontaneously for us what primitive democracy imagined each of us could do spontaneously for himself, that every day and twice a day it will present us with a true picture of all the outer world in which we are interested.

stop and write: what is the problem with political scientists and champions of democratic politics? What does Lippman say about how truth is arrived at? Does truth, on its own, win out in democratic debates?

Pay attention now as Lippman brings in the question of the economies of print media. This is my favorite part:

2 This insistent and ancient belief that truth is not earned, but inspired, revealed, supplied gratis, comes out very plainly in our economic prejudices as readers of newspapers. We expect the newspaper to serve us with truth however unprofitable the truth may be. For this difficult and often dangerous service, which we recognize as fundamental, we expected to pay until recently the smallest coin turned out by the mint. We have accustomed ourselves now to paying two and even three cents on weekdays, and on Sundays, for an illustrated encyclopedia and vaudeville entertainment attached, we have screwed ourselves up to paying a nickel or even a dime. Nobody thinks for a moment that he ought to pay for his newspaper. He expects the fountains of truth to bubble, but he enters into no contract, legal or moral, involving any risk, cost or trouble to himself. He will pay a nominal price when it suits him, will stop paying whenever it suits him, will turn to another paper when! that suits him. Somebody has said quite aptly that the newspaper editor has to be re-elected every day. This casual and one-sided relationship between readers and press is an anomaly of our civilization. There is nothing else quite like it, and it is, therefore, hard to compare the press with any other business or institution. It is not a business pure and simple, partly because the product is regularly sold below cost, but chiefly because the community applies one ethical measure to the press and another to trade or manufacture. Ethically a newspaper is judged as if it were a church or a school. But if you try to compare it with these you fail; the taxpayer pays for the public school, the private school is endowed or supported by tuition fees, there are subsidies and collections for the church. You cannot compare journalism with law, medicine or engineering, for in every one of these professions the consumer pays for the service. A free press, if you judge by the attitude! of the readers, means newspapers that are virtually given away. Yet the critics of the press are merely voicing the moral standards of the community, when they expect such an institution to live on the same plane as that on which the school, the church, and the disinterested professions are supposed to live. This illustrates again the concave character of democracy. No need for artificially acquired information is felt to exist. The information must come naturally, that is to say gratis, if not out of the heart of the citizen, then gratis out of the newspaper. The citizen will pay for his telephone, his railroad rides, his motor car, his entertainment. But he does not pay openly for his news.

He will, however, pay handsomely for the privilege of having someone read about him. He will pay directly to advertise. And he will pay indirectly for the advertisements of other people, because that payment, being concealed in the price of commodities is part of an invisible environment that he does not effectively comprehend. It would be regarded as an outrage to have to pay openly the price of a good ice cream soda for all the news of the world, though the public will pay that and more when it buys the advertised commodities. The public pays for the press, but only when the payment is concealed.

3 Circulation is, therefore, the means to an end. It becomes an asset only when it can be sold to the advertiser, who buys it with revenues secured through indirect taxation of the reader.⁴ The kind of circulation which the advertiser will buy depends on what he has to sell. It may be "quality" or "mass." On the whole there is no sharp dividing line, for in respect to most commodities sold by advertising, the customers are neither the small class of the very rich nor the very poor. They are the people with enough surplus over bare necessities to exercise discretion in their buying. The paper, therefore, which goes into the homes of the fairly prosperous is by and large the one which offers most to the advertiser. It may also go into the homes of the poor, but except for certain lines of goods, an analytical advertising agent does not rate that circulation as a great asset, unless, as seems to be the case with certain! of Mr. Hearst's properties, the circulation is enormous. A newspaper which angers those whom it pays best to reach through advertisements is a bad medium for an advertiser. And since no one ever claimed that advertising was philanthropy, advertisers buy space in those publications which are fairly certain to reach their future customers. One need not spend much time worrying about the unreported scandals of the dry-goods merchants. They represent nothing really significant, and incidents of this sort are less common than many critics of the press suppose. The real problem is that the readers of a newspaper, unaccustomed to paying the cost of newsgathering, can be capitalized only by turning them into circulation that can be sold to manufacturers and merchants. And those whom it is most important to capitalize are those who have the most money to spend. Such a press is bound to respect the point of view of the buying public. It is for this buying public that newspapers are edited and published, for without that support the newspaper cannot live. A newspaper can flout an advertiser, it can attack a powerful banking or traction interest, but if it alienates the buying public, it loses the one indispensable asset of its existence. Mr. John L. Given,⁵ formerly of the New York Evening Sun, stated in 1914 that out of over two thousand three hundred dailies published in the United States, there were about one hundred and seventy-five printed in cities having over one hundred thousand inhabitants. These constitute the press for "general news." They are

the key papers which collect the news dealing with great events, and even the people who do not read any one of the one hundred and seventy-five depend ultimately upon them for news of the outer world. For they make up the great press associations which cooperate in the exchange of news. Each is, therefore, not only the informant of its own readers, but it is the local reporter for the newspapers of other cities. The rural press and the special press by and large, take their general news from these key papers. And among these there are some very much richer than others, so that for international news, in the main, the whole press of the nation may depend upon the reports of the press associations and the special services of a few metropolitan dailies. Roughly speaking, the economic support for general news gathering is in the price paid for advertised goods by the fairly prosperous sections of cities with more than one hundred thousand inhabitants. These buying publics are composed of the members of families, who depend for their income chiefly on trade, merchandising, the direction of manufacture, and finance. They are the clientele among whom it pays best to advertise in a newspaper. They wield a concentrated purchasing power, which may be less in volume than the aggregate for farmers and workingmen; but within the radius covered by a daily newspaper they are the quickest assets.

4 They have, moreover, a double claim to attention. They are not only the best customers for the advertiser, they include the advertisers. Therefore the impression made by the newspapers on this public matters deeply. Fortunately this public is not unanimous. It may be "capitalistic" but it contains divergent views on what capitalism is, and how it is to be run. Except in times of danger, this respectable opinion is sufficiently divided to permit of considerable differences of policy. These would be greater still if it were not that publishers are themselves usually members of these urban communities, and honestly see the world through the lenses of their associates and friends. They are engaged in a speculative business,⁶ which depends on the general condition of trade, and more peculiarly on a circulation based not on a marriage contract with their readers, but on free love. The object of every publisher is, therefore, to turn his circulation from a medley of catch-as-catch-can news stand buyers into a devoted band of constant readers. A newspaper that can really depend upon the loyalty of its readers is as independent as a newspaper can be, given the economics of modern journalism.⁷ A body of readers who stay by it through thick and thin is a power greater than any which the individual advertiser can wield, and a power great enough to break up a combination of advertisers. Therefore, whenever you find a newspaper betraying its readers for the sake of an advertiser, you can be fairly certain either that the publisher sincerely shares the views of the advertiser, or that he thinks, perhaps mistakenly, he cannot

count upon the support of his readers if he openly resists dictation. It is a question of whether the readers, who do not pay in cash for their news, will pay for it in loyalty.

What is the problem with American consumers of the news?

What is the role of advertising in the news?

How does price impact the truth content in the press?

What else did you get from this bit? Do some application of these ideas to today's news platform: syndicated television, twitter, memes on instagram, online newspapers.