Time-Machine Millionaire:

Episode: “Twitter, Truth & Lies”

This month Twitter and Google have come under scrutiny from the United States government or, more specifically, from Congress’ Senate Intelligence Committee (SIC). Twitter’s CEO **Jack Dorsey** made an appearance to offer his defense, but Google’s executives were conspicuously absent (and thus will also be conspicuously absent from our debate; maybe someone should bring that up). The SIC is conducting an investigation about “meddling” in the 2016 election. What does the SIC mean by “meddling”, exactly?

There are a couple of criticisms leveled against Twitter and Google in the SIC hearings and the surrounding discussions in the news. One issue is “shadow banning” (cf works cited, 6), meaning that Twitter has been accused of using an algorithm to hide conservative accounts during a phone user’s search. Then, Twitter (along with other large corporations such as Amazon, cf works cited, 7) has been accused of allowing or even creating fake accounts in order to spread fake news and propaganda. Finally, the SIC (alongside many civilian activist groups) think that Google has not done enough to regulate its advertisers and ads. Does Google even know where the ads are going or who they are supporting? No. Often they do not.

The SIC are questioning corporations, but are they going deep enough to address the real issue? The role of Google and Twitter (and Facebook and Instagram) in the 2016 election is a symptom of something deeper: a relationship between (social) media and (online) advertising that allows all sorts of corporations (and foreign financiers) to influence Public Opinion. Why? Everyday citizens, aka the “Buying Public” (to use Lippman’s phrase) do not want to pay for the news. So someone else has to. That someone else is the corporate world, specifically any company that needs a captive audience for their advertisement. So ads are run, the captive audience is fought over, and the media outlets get their money. Newspapers have run this way for more than a century; Twitter and Google are no different. But runing ads on the internet required new platforms. So **Susan Wojcicki** developed a suite of programs (Adwords, Adsense, Doubleclick, and Offers), many of which worked on the concept of Pay-Per-Click advertising. This has resulted in some serious consequences for the quality of our journalism (cf works cited, 4 and 5).

Today, the two biggest critics of this system are authors **Noam Chomsky** and **Edward Herman**. In the excerpt you will read online, they argue that the same problems of the 1970s and 80s have not really been solved with the advent of the internet; they have just taken on new faces. Make sure you identify what these issues are (and bring them up in the debate if you are Chomsky and Herman).

In this week’s episode, all of these characters will sit down and have a debate. No one here is against democracy. No one here wants to trick the entire public and force them into a totalitarian society. But each character has a very different idea about how media should function and how it should be funded. So **the goal is to reach a synthesis that allows media to be both funded and democratic.**

We turn to the past for help, interviewing three characters that have a ton of experience and wisdom in the area. The three men debated these same issues as new technologies (print journalism, mass-advertising, radio, and television) were first being developed. **Walter Lippman** provided many of the key vocabulary words for the discussion (and I hope to hear these in the debate, such as #thebuyingpublic, #manufactureofconsent #fictionnews, #publicopinion). While his analysis of the nascent news industry was absolutely spot-on, his prescription (what he thought should be done about it) were pretty polemic. (cf the end of the Lippman excerpt for class, Works Cited 1, and also the summary of the Lippman/Dewey debate, Works Cited 2). **John Dewey** was a philosopher at Columbia University who had a very different idea about what reforms should be made in the news, even though he wholeheartedly agreed with many of Lippman’s explanations of how the press functioned. And both Lippman and Dewey were critical of advertising and its consequences on the nature of news content.

So we have to hear also from **Edward Bernays**, the champion of advertising (and the father of both advertising and public relations). He usually worked for the government or for private non-news corporations. But he also spent some time coaching William Paley, the father of CBS. Without Bernays, CBS would not have gotten off the ground, and would not be here today to provide us news. Bernays stressed to Paley that a viable (successful) news program (at the time it was radio, not television) required funding from advertising. He also suggested to bring in an entertainment factor: so Paley began to alternate between news reports and detective shows with bloody murder scenes.[[1]](#footnote-1) After all, how bad could entertainment be? Didn’t the entertainment spike the number of listeners? And didn’t advertising funds make it possible for journalists to do their work?

**Cast:**

Walter Lippmans

John Dewey

Edward Bernays

Jack Dorsey, Twitter CEO

Susan Wojcicki, Current CEO of Youtube and designer of Google’s suite of Pay-Per-Click Advertising programs

Noam Chomsky, co-author of *Manufacturing Consent*

(optional character: Edward Herman, co-author of *Manufacturing Consent*)

**Works Cited (Material that contestants must check out):**

1. Lippman excerpt, “Public Opinion” (the week’s course reading)
2. Summary of the Lippman vs Dewey debate: <https://www.infoamerica.org/teoria_articulos/lippmann_dewey.htm>
3. Chomsky and Herman, New Intro to “Manufacturing Consent” (on our course website)
4. Consequences of Pay-Per-Click Advertising on news sites:

[https://www.ppchero.com/the-good-bad-and-ugly-impact-of-ppc-on-journalism/](https://www.ppchero.com/the-good-bad-and-ugly-impact-of-ppc-on-journalism/https:/www.ppchero.com/the-good-bad-and-ugly-impact-of-ppc-on-journalism/)

1. Findings from the recent Future of Journalism conference: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1461670X.2014.930254>
2. Twitter CEO testifying before Senate Committee:

<https://www.cnbc.com/2018/09/05/twitter-shares-drop-6percent-during-dorseys-senate-testimony.html> **Imp**: note the idea of “Shadow banning”

1. Twitter Bots:

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/aug/23/amazon-fc-ambassadors-twitter-working-conditions>

1. GoogleAds posting on fake news websites:

<https://campaignforaccountability.org/work/how-google-makes-millions-off-of-fake-news/>

1. Scott Cutlip, *The Unseen Power: Public Relations* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Publishers), chapter 8. But watching the *Century of Self* documentary should give you sufficient information to play as Bernays. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)