



Public Opinion

Walter Lippmann

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Public Opinion exposes how media can shape public perception and how that perception changes society. Walter Lippmann is a two-time Pulitzer Prize-winner and visionary.

Public Opinion Details

Date : Published August 24th 2015 by Start Publishing LLC (first published 1922)

ISBN :

Author : Walter Lippmann

Format : Kindle Edition 242 pages

Genre : Politics, Nonfiction, Sociology, Philosophy, Psychology, Writing, Journalism

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Alan says

In times like these, when we sleep with screens feeding us images of war, it is important to go back to this classic.

Emotions run high when photographs, pictures and videos rule our understanding of foreign affairs.

It is equally important to realize how little information we actually have access to.

Not so much has changed since the age of television: public emotions get mobilized together with armed forces, and, as we develop an aggressive tunnel-vision the enemy starts condensing into a target to strike .

We must remember that, of all public emotions, anger is easier to ignite.

Jindřich Mynarz says

At times wonderfully poetic and pregnant, other times needlessly obtuse. A classic, or a piece of prescient writing, some might call it, the Public Opinion delivers highly relevant food for thought on media in (post-)democratic world.

Alex says

Nobody on Earth is omniscient and to make sense of the sea of info that surrounds us all all we make use of what Lippmann calls 'stereotypes,' preconceptions of ideas that help us fill in the gaps between the points of information we're exposed to. People carry different stereotypes with them and the same people can look at the exact same evidence and come to different conclusions, not to say that there aren't cases where the shared stereotypes of society can lead to near unanimous agreement.

I get this point of view and I agree with it, although I began to anticipate Lippmann's embrace of relativism that never actually happens. There's never any outright declaration that because people can have differing interpretations of the facts we ought to embrace nihilism, relativism, pyrrhonism, or even pragmatism, though William James is cited a lot, because of course, his work in psychology. Given what he writes about, Lippmann seems to believe that there is an objective world out there, the information of which can be easily manipulated and affect the course of politics, which he seems to be rather concerned about.

He dismisses the idea of a coherent public opinion. Society cannot be viewed as any sort of being, and to personify it is misleading. Instead of you have a mass of individual opinions, vastly differing, easily manipulated and some of them manage to filter up through the mechanisms of democracy and affect public policy. A lot of decisions however involve factors that can disregard what the public believes, especially in an emergency. It's a very cynical view of democracy and an honest one. I disagree with Rousseau on so much but one of the things I believe he got right is that democracy only works in small countries, I believe for this very reason. Public opinion is less of an incoherent mess in such examples, and people are at least closer to the very small number of leaders actually involved in decisions.

The theme of stereotypes and the very limited points of contact we actually have with our world of information continues with more historical and political examples. Sometimes I felt like I was reading a book about World War One: The French government figures out the best way to continue lying to the public, the U.S. mobilizes its propaganda apparatus after joining the war, US senators debate on military action after a garbled report about American troops in Italy reaches congress. He also writes about the press and how in a world of near infinite events, a few of them manage to find themselves into our publications as 'news'.

The book ends with a remedy for the ills that Lippman identifies and it's a very straightforward and unsurprising call for critical thinking. *[The teacher can instruct his students] for example, to look in his newspaper for the place where the dispatch was filed, for the name of the correspondent, the name of the press service, the authority given for the statement, the circumstances under which the statement was secured...to ask himself whether the reporter saw what he describes, and to remember how that reporter described other events in the past. He can teach him the character of censorship, of the idea of privacy, and furnish him with knowledge of past propaganda. He can... make him aware of the stereotype, and can educate a habit of introspection about the imagery evoked by printed words. He can... produce a life-long realization of the way codes impose a special pattern upon the imagination. He can teach men to catch themselves making allegories, dramatizing relations, and personifying abstractions. He can show the pupil how he identifies himself with these allegories, how he becomes interested, and how he selects the attitude, heroic, romantic, economic which he adopts while holding a particular opinion.*

The rating might seem a little low. I really liked the psychology aspects of the book, but many of the politics sections seemed to take a life of their own. They weren't necessarily boring. I like reading about politics, but I felt they wandered to far from the point, and even could've fit into their own book.

Hemhek Song says

A timely read; thought provoking. A knowledge of American political and literary history is needed to understand all the references.

John Mcjohnnyman says

Incredibly insightful, clever, and as applicable to today's media and politics as it must've been when originally written. Lippman's analysis of the many abstract and underlying forces that shape the opinions we hold about the world is simply beautiful, and will leave you more critically aware and prepared to handle the many stereotypes and symbols used to manipulate the truth and our impression of it.

Lyndon Bailey says

Written beautifully and with penetrating insights on every page, this book was a hard read due to the format and the text but the language itself, while not challenging, is elegantly wrought.

You'll probably hate his conservative apologism and barely concealed authoritarianism (not to mention shilling for the future PR industry) but it is well worth reading as his critiques of politics and exposure of the

problems faced by democracies deserve attention.

Yasiru (reviews will soon be removed and linked to blog) says

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper2/CD...>

Georgina Koutrouditsou says

Για την εποχή που γράφτηκε θα πρέπει να ήταν πολύ προοδευτική.
Ωστόσο για σήμερα & για όσα ανεφάρει, είναι σχετικά ξεπερασμένο.
Υχει ωραία κείμενακια όμως για μαθητές Λυκείου που θέλουν να τα πνε καλύτερα στο μάθημα της κθεσης..

Ben Peters says

Whatever else one may think of this classic, it is written to take one's breath away. The images of Lippmann's prose alone--e.g. the Platonic, iconic "pictures in the mind," itself an almost mandatory talking point for those who pass through liberal arts education in America--guarantee that this book will repay reading and rereading. As for those who dismiss or belittle Lippmann as an elitist ready to cede political power to the expertise of the few, I am not convinced. Yes, he wrote in favor of those who might, as Chomsky later caught him, willfully "manufacture consent." Surely, not a happy image in an era sandwiched between the propaganda of two world wars. But still, I am not convinced that Lippmann's views are--or ever were--principally incompatible with a healthy public and a democratic state. It appears, recent historians have shown, that most of the legendary debate posited between Lippmann and John Dewey was fabricated well after the 1920s and 1930s. (Most of it, for understandable reasons, by the ever-incandescent James W. Carey in the 1980s.) Considering the spread of volunteer communities that leverage their own self-policed, peer-reviewed expertise for the benefit of the many in scalable, collaborative ways, online and off, it seems that this work finds fresh relevance in a digital era. It's no longer Dewey's democracy versus Lippmann's experts; it's time for Deweyan democrats to reacquaint themselves with Lippmann, and Public Opinion makes a great meeting point.

Trevor says

I read this book after reading Brian's review here <http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/...>

Where this book is really quite interesting is in the fact that it is a kind of modernisation of Plato's Republic. I'm not just saying that because it starts by quoting the allegory of the cave, but because all of the central ideas of the book seem to me to be essentially Platonic. For example, democracy is presented as a really good idea 'in theory', but one that is incapable of working in practice. This is put forward for much the same reason's Plato used in criticising democracy: that it is too easy to be perverted by flatterers, that 'the people' are too blinded by their day-to-day needs to understand the great sweep of history, and that the masses are lead more by their loins and stomachs than by their reason.

But this book also updates Plato by reference to what was at the time the latest in psychological research which shows that mere humans don't cope very well with complexity. The problem is that the world is an incredibly complex place. People understand their own needs quite well, but, and this is where the book is much more intelligent than say, works by Hayek or Friedman, an understanding of these immediate needs simply isn't enough to understand the complexities of life in society. Where Hayek and Friedman resolve this complication by essentially denying society (see Margaret Thatcher's famous 'there is no such thing as society, there are individuals and there are families') – Lippmann does quite the opposite. He says that because there is such a thing as society and since the path necessary to forge society onward is too complex to be understood by the great mass of humanity, there is a need for 'experts' to mould the minds of people in society so that they choose the right path. His definition of an expert as someone disinterested and a kind of boffin is also amusing.

Given people are confronted by complexity all of the time the solution they have for dealing with this complexity is essentially to resort to stereotypes. And he doesn't limit this just to the great unwashed – everyone is guilty of these simplifications. The problem is we couldn't function without such simplifications – but obviously enough, our simplified view always leaves us in danger of choosing the wrong path – and, again, this is why those disinterested souls (what Plato referred to as Philosopher Kings) need to intervene to ensure that government of the people and for the people doesn't end up government by the people. The people are never disinterested enough to make good rulers. And when they vote for something they don't vote for a single reason - but for a complexity of reasons, with people voting for the same candidate often for quite opposite reasons. This part of the book was particularly interesting.

Many of the same arguments put today about why we can't really have a free press where also standard then, it seems - and I hadn't really expected this. For example, you might be excused for believing that it was the internet that brought about the argument that because we aren't prepared to pay for our news, that we need to expect that those who will pay for our news, advertisers, will filter what we read through their perspective and in their interests. But it is argued here that the little amount we are prepared to pay for newspapers, even back then, also meant that the news was effectively free and therefore advertising has always played this role.

The best of this was his discussion of why strike action is generally portrayed badly in the press. To Lippmann it is simply a matter of self-interest. Not just the self interest of the ruling class – you know, the owners of the factories being more or less the same group as the owners of the papers and so the papers generally taking their side as a matter of course. But rather it is also the self-interest of the readers. The readers, on average, are unlikely to be directly involved in the strike – but, if the strike is effective, they are likely to be affected by the strike. Perhaps the striking factory makes something they need to buy. Perhaps it will stop them being able to work themselves through the lack of supply of something they use in their work – such being the interconnections of life in society. So, the fact strike action is likely to have a negative impact on the reader – much more likely than it is to have a positive impact on them – it is fairly safe for newspapers to not be on the side of the strikers. Also, the reasons why people go on strike generally either sound selfish or are too complicated to make into a simple story to tell. Anyway, people think in stereotypes and one of the stereotypes is that strikes are always bad. Now, I still hold to the naïve view that newspapers advance the class interests of their owners and that is part of the reason why strikes are generally portrayed as bad – but I did find this alternative view interesting too.

There is, and always will be, something chilling in the Platonic vision of the master race finding useful lies to tell to the great mass of ill-informed humanity so as to distract and direct them towards the best of all possible worlds. But at least there is an honesty to this book that is quite missing from so much else today. That people like Murdoch act out these views today is not in the least hidden by the fact they say nearly the exact opposite of what they do in practice. Give me the chilling truth over the pacifying lie any day.

A lot of this book is quite dated now - I'm not sure how interesting the discussion on guild socialism is, to be

honest, and many of the discussions on WW1 were overly long for me and too specific for me to really see their worth in supporting the argument of the book - but I think you could nearly get away with reading the first and last chapters of this to get enough of an overview to be going on with.

Anska says

Why should one bother to read a book on the shaping of personal and public opinions almost a century old? Surely, in an age when twitter has replaced telegrams we have become much more savvy in dealing with an ever expanding amount of news than people living between the World Wars. As my mocking tone indicates, Lippmann's reasoning about the production of everyday knowledge is still very much up to date and can easily be applied to those media which have joined the ranks of newspapers, magazines and cinemas since the 1920s - and so is his primary critic on decision-making.

There is however one aspect of his theory which, in my opinion, needs further consideration: Lippmann seems to assume that people, even if not necessarily going to great length to do so, actually want to make well informed decisions most of the time. He argues how, through the use of symbols, emotions may be utilised to evoke a seemingly homogeneous reaction from a mixed crowd. However he does not consider that people might deliberately follow a symbol blindly in order to experience said emotions, reason be damned - or as a user in a forum once put it "Sometimes you simply want to hate." While Lippmann touches upon the issue when discussing what makes the cinema more attractive than the art gallery or when pointing out that violent feelings while not acceptable in civil life are acceptable on a battlefield, he does not explore how people craving such unacceptable emotions might still try to realise them without being scorned. (Then again I might have missed a portion, because I only had little time for the book and skimmed through most of his lengthy examples.)

If you have digested a basic diet of post-structuralist and semiotic texts, you might find *Public Opinion* not to be a world-changing experience, but it is still well worth its time. While Lippmann does indulge in the loquacious style typical of his time when giving examples, most of his writing has a remarkably clear, poetic quality to it and the book might be quite a goldmine for those who occasionally enjoy substituting quotation for wit.

Stephen Masri says

Elegant prose but so high flown as to be vague and more a matter of highly personal musing than clear exposition

Robert says

This book is unfairly maligned because Chomsky holds it out as an example of elite liberal ideology (and it is a fair example in that regard), but Lippmann has a point about "public opinion". He wasn't the first or last to point out that the spontaneous majorities on various subjects are not necessarily rational or advantageous, and that they usually *aren't* when the public bases opinions off of sketchy information (and that this is a common phenomenon). Further, his argument that news and the truth are distinct should be uncontroversial in 2013. His point that they *can not* be the same thing, because truth *can not* be delivered in easily

digestible pieces, should also ring true to most critical minds witnessing the so-called "Information Age" play out.

What makes Lippmann so unpopular is his "solution" to the problems of human ignorance and irrationality in a democracy: experts. Experts help wrap up a real problem that Lippmann describes quite vividly, but Lippmann does not seem to accept that those who make decisions (who in his mind must be distinct from experts---and in fact he sees an institutionalization of independent intelligence gatherers protected from legislators and the executive) are still subject to the bulk of the problems he describes. A President is not an expert, zhe must rely on experts to form a judgment and make a decision, and so ultimately a President must be an "expert of experts". All the problems about dealing with an unseen environment remain, only they are pushed farther down the line a bit.

Kerry says

So overwrought with examples and anecdotes very little concrete information bleeds through. Man, what a blowhard.

Jasmine says

I really liked this book. Although it was written more than 80 years ago I think that it addresses a very current issue.

This book begins with a discussion of social psychology. It explains how people see through different paradigms.

Then he builds from this a political theory. He denies "democracy" and discusses the federalist government, but I found that these designations are not as understandable in the modern vernacular. You have to pay close attention to system in which he is defining these terms.

The theory assumes a lack of capacity in people that is kind of upsetting, but it is easily understandable in the context of the civil and first world war that the school of realist democracy was reacting to.

Lippmann suggests a solution based in the use of insular experts helping to inform and direct government. He believes that these experts should enlighten the public, but he says that the public can only be involved in a direct democracy in small agrarian societies such as those Thomas Jefferson promoted.

There is also an interesting discussion of history in a more "present tense". He sites H.G. Wells history of the world which is a book that has fallen greatly out of use since a lot of science has changed since it was written. He also talks a lot about the founding fathers and fights in policy between Jefferson, Hamilton, Washington and Madison. These are contexts that tend to get blurred in more modern overviews of history, but are obviously very clear and important for Lippmann.
