



## Lippmann revisited

### A comment 80 years subsequent to 'Public Opinion'

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#### ABSTRACT

The contribution argues that complaints about journalism follow from the societal ideal regarding the media as an institution of direct democracy expected to present us with a true picture of the external world in which we are interested. The illusory nature of this ideal is enhanced by the characteristics of the edited society in which information 'providers' try to involve the media in a political struggle over opinion-shaping, agenda-setting, personal profiling, economic control and political influence. Journalism and politics both concentrate on the specific, the short-term, the individualized and the tangible, rejecting the attention attached to the general, the long-term, the collective and the abstract. The core of the problem appears to be the intolerable and unworkable myth that each of us must acquire a competent opinion about all public affairs. This fiction, partly a product of the voters' rational ignorance, creates a tension between our ideals of democracy and the realities.

KEY WORDS ■ democracy ■ edited society ■ journalism ■ politics ■ public opinion ■ rational ignorance

### Introduction

In his third axiom Carey (1996) emphasized that journalism is another name for democracy or, better, that you cannot have journalism without democracy. While the latter observation is absolutely true I am more skeptical with regard to the former. I endorse the view implicit in Lippmann's analyses (1922, 1927) that we do have difficulties in coming to terms with the relation between democracy and journalism. The problem has partly to do with the inadequacies of the reporting process and partly with the lack of understanding of the true political reality by citizens. People including journalists take as facts not what are but what they perceive to be facts, a counterfeit of reality or a 'pseudo-environment'. However, I do not feel comfortable with Lippmann's call for

experts to provide a more valid picture of the environment. Eighty years subsequent to the publication of 'Public Opinion' the Lippmann problem, however, is an even more burning issue. This is my reason for revisiting Lippmann and presenting elements of his thinking in more contemporary terms.

### **Ideas and realities**

The media and journalists have, for many years, been strongly criticized. Part of the problem is the intolerable and unworkable fiction that each of us must acquire a competent opinion about all public affairs and that the media have a particular role to play in this respect. The critics as well as the apologists expect the media and journalists to make up for all that was not foreseen in the theory of democracy: the understanding of news and the criteria of news; the move towards an edited society; the difficulties of reconciling the general and the specific, the collective and the individualized, the short- and long-term perspectives, the abstract and the tangible; and the rational ignorance of voters. These factors imply a tension between our ideals and the reality of politics, media, journalists and their interaction.

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. (Lippmann, 1922: 203)

We still abide by the fiction that decisions follow from a democratic dialogue in which we all participate. Every single citizen is regarded as sovereign and omni-competent. (Lippmann, 1927: 11)

This creates a tension between the reality and the ideal. From this tension springs frustration. Lippmann describes the ideal as a fiction:

I do not mean an undesirable ideal. I mean an unattainable ideal, only in the sense that it is bad for a fat man to try to be a ballet dancer. An ideal should express the true possibilities of its subject. When it does not it perverts the true possibilities. The ideal of the omni-competent, sovereign citizen is, in my opinion, such a false ideal. It is unattainable. The pursuit of it is misleading. The failure to achieve it has produced the current disenchantment. (Lippmann, 1927: 29)

'Political correctness', obviously, must dissociate itself from this view and endorse Adam's dictum that democracy includes

a public that is informed and, in degrees, attentive to politics and the management of the state. In this vein, democracy is concerned operationally with

constituting authority and providing citizens with the equipment to watch and to evaluate the exercise of such authority. Journalists, among others, provide information and thought on which consciousness of the state and its officers is formed. More broadly, journalists are frequently involved in the formation of social consciousness in the hand of the public. (Adam, 2001: 316)

In principle, however, the apparent contradiction is dissolved by recognizing the difference between a positive and a normative point of view.

### **The malaise of journalism**

For many years, a current of general hostile feelings has been diffused concerning the media. The critics suggest that newspapers and television reporting of our complex daily life is out of all proportion, tame, thin, sensationalist, faddish, dominated by single cases, individualizing, etc. Initially elitist groupings only voiced these criticisms. In recent years, however, the critique has not only persisted but has evolved from among the ranks of the journalists themselves.

Peter Harms Larsen (1998) recently crystallized the criticism in 12 claims dealing with the nuisance of journalism. Individually and in sum they adopt a sharply critical perspective on the work of the journalists and tell a story of a profession undergoing a crisis, of professional standards in a state of disorganization and of a societal role of journalists under erosion. All these claims can be debated. None of them is new. What is new is that the criticism is so very persistent.

### **About news and truths**

Politicians as well as the general public criticize the media for dramatizing and creating their own reality instead of informing the citizens about the real incidents in real life. This reproach results from societal ideals in which the media have come to be regarded as an institution of direct democracy, charged on a much wider scale, and from day to day, with the function often attributed to the initiative, referendum and recall (Lippmann, 1922: 229). The media are burdened with the unreasonable illusion that they are to spontaneously provide us the truth which democrats had hoped was inborn. Democratic theory assumes that the press is able to create a mystical force, 'Public Opinion', that will take up the slack in public institutions. By this assumption, the theory employs a misleading standard of judgement. The limited nature of news and the unbounded complexity of society are overlooked, while the human endurance, public spirit and omni-competency are overestimated

(Lippmann, 1922: 228). The media have generally promoted the idea that they could do what a naive democratic theory expects them to do. At a great moral cost to themselves, they have encouraged a democracy still bound to its original premise that for every organ of government, for every social problem, the media could serve as the machinery providing information not automatically provided.

The media, however, is no substitute for reporting institutions. They are like lighthouses and the journalists are the lighthouse keepers. The beam of the searchlight sweeps over the reality and focuses for a moment on this, a moment on that, bringing one episode and then another out of darkness into vision. The lighthouse keeper reports on what he is observing but he does not observe everything. And he does not observe things at the same time. Therefore, he reports on incidents. The news cannot mirror nor can it reproduce 'real incidents in real life'. The news is the report of an aspect that has obtruded itself, (Lippmann, 1922: 216). The news deals only with that part of the reality that has become visible, with something that has happened. If the people who know about these matters fail (knowingly or unknowingly) to pass on this information, the news will be colored partly by the sources' and partly by the journalists' interests, metaphors, coding, decoding, culturally determined discourses, stereotyping, interpretations and so on.

Only a small part of reality is absolutely recognizable. There exists but a very small body of exact knowledge that requires no outstanding ability or training to deal with it. The rest is at the journalist's discretion.

News and truth, therefore, are not the same thing. The news tells about an event, while the truth assumes that the hidden facts are brought to light, set into relation with each other, thus making a picture of reality on which men can act (Lippmann, 1922: 226).

### **The edited society**

The problem is due to the fact that the information is not available either for the individual or the media. But it is not only that. Information is often available in a form that does not aim at imparting knowledge, enlightenment or the uncovering of 'the truth'. We live in the edited society, see Lund (1999) and Ekecrantz and Olsson (1998). In the edited society it is not only the mass media that assess the reality from the perspective of the editorial news criteria.

Established news criteria (sensation, conflict, identification and topicality/significance) are a key part of the journalist's knowledge and tool kit, because they are founded on a solid knowledge of readers' psychology, crosscutting classes, gender and age groups. The criteria reflect the time-honored

knowledge and experience of journalists and editors as to how information should be collected, edited and transformed into news, so that it stimulates people to buy and read their newspaper or watch their television broadcast.

Among the criteria top priority is given to 'conflict': 'The *demand* of the reading public, the need for democratic accountability and the ideal type of the journalist [according to the occupational ideology of journalists, JHP] all converge in a passion for conflict', see Hartley (2000: 40). Topicality and significance, in contrast, are attributed a lower priority.

Consequently, in trying to influence the public and to set the agenda, it is expedient for politicians, managers and heads of interest groups to make use of exaggeration, simplification, polarization, intensification, concretization and personification, if they want penetration in the media. They know it and they exploit it.

They have learned the news criteria in order to lead the media's hunt for news in a direction conditioned by their own interests. Attempting to control, to regiment and to arrange they know that feeding the journalists with photo-opportunities, sound bites, punch lines, good stories, critical reports and surprising scientific results gives them excellent opportunities for influencing the editorial process in its production of the daily news.

In the 'journalistified' society, journalists – paradoxically – risk being reduced to marionettes deceived by their own news criteria. They appear to be setting the agenda but, in fact, it is often others who have pulled the strings and written the lines. We are encountering Pierre Bourdieu's (1998) 'evil circle of information'. The media are affected by cultural inbreeding: if one asks, perhaps a bit naively, how those entrusted with the task to inform us are themselves informed, it turns out that, by and large, they are informed by others whose task it is to inform. To know what you have to say, one needs to know what others are saying.

In the edited society the risk of a discrepancy between the news and the truth is even greater than that suggested by Lippmann. To the extent that we see journalism as having a prominent place in democracy's architecture this is a disturbing acknowledgement, in particular because the risk is intensified by the trend towards a greater emphasis on 'single-case' journalism and 'single-case' politics and by the rational ignorance of the electorate.

### **Single-case journalism and single-case politics**

Apart from the well-known criticism of single-case journalism it does imply another regrettable corollary: the status of the public is gradually transformed from being citizens and electors to consumers and clients. The roles as victims

and 'consequence experts' are legitimized on an equal footing with other democratic roles. Individuals are free to express their difficulties and problems without first having to channel their problems and demands through the representative channels.

It is no coincidence that the historian Henrik Jensen (1998) called his book *The Century of the Victim*. The strategy of emphasizing one's victimization has become a symbol of our social life in a complicated world. The role of the victim is successful – starting with immediate attention from the surroundings, which for a moment pushes a person out of the gray mass and into the limelight. More and more people push themselves impulsively and without deeper moral reflections into the role as 'defenseless victims of brutal conditions'. 'I am not to be blamed. Blame lies with the others. Society is at fault.'

The irresponsible victim has obtained a privileged status in society and in the media. 'To identify the victim' is a typical journalistic angle. The public reacts with a strange mix of compassion, fear, suspicion, shame, contempt and envy.

Single-case journalism, however, goes hand in hand with single-case politics. When politics develops into day-to-day management, the single cases overshadow the wider, general perspectives. One of the basic deficiencies of public political debate is precisely the absence of the wider perspective. Neglect of the general, long-term perspective leads to the dominance of short-term politics and this may cause quite insurmountable and unanticipated problems.

Most political decisions must solve a short-term problem: the original idea of the Danish voluntary early retirement pension (passed in 1979) was to facilitate the entry of young people into the labor market and to reduce youth unemployment. The result has been a still lower retirement age. By a recent political intervention in the labor market agreements, including extended holidays, the politicians coped with an acute problem; yet the long-term problem concerning the shortage of labor, the decline in the number of hours worked and in the taxable capacity was intensified, thus subjecting the welfare model to greater financial strain.

It is easy to criticize the media for not attending to the general and long-term perspectives, but solving the problem demands that the legislative branch itself takes its time and puts the problems into their proper perspective.

### **The basic asymmetry**

Sometimes, however, a genuine political decision with far-reaching repercussions must be adopted. Provision of reliable information in such cases does not

seem to be the journalists' 'cup of tea'. The reason is that – for politicians as well as journalists – it is difficult to reconcile the general and the specific, the collective and the individual, the abstract and the concrete, the short- and long-term interests.

This was clearly documented by the Danish 1998 agreement on the state budget bill. The objective was to prevent a future unpleasant situation from occurring if no interventions were made. The benefits, obviously, were vague, abstract, collective and were to materialize in the future. The costs, in contrast, had to do with immediate, tangible and individualized disadvantages experienced in the present.

Not surprisingly, the public reacted like an insulted child. They felt victimized by the treachery of politicians. The problem of this basic asymmetry means neglecting the comprehensive perspective. The worried voices of the professional victims make themselves heard more easily. The illustrious ideal of the informed citizenry able to form a competent opinion on all public affairs is subject to erosion.

To a growing extent it is experts who decode and interpret the universe of knowledge motivating political decisions. The corollary is the development of a powerful class of knowing people separated from a general public absorbed in single cases, personal cases and scandals. The public is divided into two separate subcultures and the bond between the electorate and the elected is cut. The problem is even worse because of the incentive on the part of voters to be ignorant on public issues.

### **The rationally ignorant voter**

Even though the allegation is contested it is a basic tenet of public choice theory, see for example Mueller (1989), that voters – to some extent at least – are rationally ignorant. One of Anthony Downs's (1957) most influential contributions to the science of politics is the concept of 'rational ignorance':

In general, it is irrational to be politically well-informed because the low returns from data simply do not justify their cost in time and other scarce resources. Therefore many voters do not bother to discover their true views before voting, and most citizens are not well enough informed to influence directly the formulation of those policies that affect them. These results demonstrate that true political equality is impossible even in democracies as long as (1) uncertainty exists, (2) there is a division of labor, and (3) men act rationally. (Downs, 1957: 259)

Ignorance of the issues is the rational individual's optimal position, whether s/he votes or not. The rational but civic-minded voter might then choose to vote for that party whose policies seem best for the nation or her/himself using

information readily at hand to make her/his choice. The present state of the economy, the government's handling of the economy as evaluated in the news media and recent changes in the voter's economic status are the likely variables that a rational but not fully informed voter considers.

Although Downs deserves the credit for making 'rational ignorance' part of the parlance of the science of politics, the idea is clearly present in Schumpeter's (1975[1942]) classic discussion of democracy:

In fact, for the private citizen musing over national affairs there is no scope for such a will and no task at which it could develop. He is a member of an unworkable committee, the committee of the whole nation, and this is why he expends less disciplined effort on mastering a political problem than he expends on a game of bridge . . . Thus the typical citizen drops down to a lower level of mental performance as soon as he enters the political field. He argues and analyzes in a way which he would readily recognize as infantile within the sphere of his real interests. He becomes a primitive again. His thinking becomes associative and affective. . . . First, even if there were no political grouping trying to influence him, the typical citizen would in political matters tend to yield to extra-rational or irrational prejudice and impulse. . . . Moreover, simply because he is not 'all there', he will relax his usual moral standards as well and occasionally give in to dark urges which the conditions of private life help him to repress. But as to wisdom or rationality of his inferences and conclusions, it may be just as bad if he gives in to a burst of general indignation. This will make it still more difficult for him to see things in their correct proportions or even to see more than one aspect of one thing at a time . . . (Schumpeter, 1975[1942]: 415–17)

It is not surprising, therefore, that Downs (1957: 29) accredits Schumpeter by emphasizing that his profound analysis of democracy forms the inspiration and foundation for Downs's whole thesis. Within our context, however, it is the more interesting that Downs writes:

Few of our conclusions are new; in fact, some have been specifically stated by Walter Lippmann in his brilliant trilogy on the relation between public opinion and democratic government. However, our attempt to trace what rational men will do, both as citizens and in government, is novel as far as we know. It tends to prove logically contentions that Lippmann and others have reached by observing politics empirically. (Downs, 1957: 14)

According to Lippmann, the general citizenry had neither the time, the ability nor the inclination to inform itself on important questions. Society was too complex, the power of stereotypes too great, man's immediate environment too dominant. The remedy – at least in Lippmann (1922) – had to be boards of experts who could distill the evidence and offer the residue of facts. But in Lippmann (1927) he seems to have despaired even of the 'experts' as a force for enlightenment. Their findings would not be sufficiently interesting to engage the attention of the public and, besides, there were too many other demands on the citizens' time.



In Lippmann's view the facts were too numerous, too complicated and often too obscure for ordinary people to understand:

We must assume that the members of a public will not anticipate a problem much before its crisis has become obvious, nor stay with the problem long after its crisis is past. They will not know the antecedent events, will not have seen the issue as it developed, will not have thought out or willed a program, and will not be able to predict the consequences of acting on that program. We must assume as a theoretically fixed premise of popular government that normally men as members of a public will not be well informed, continuously interested, non-partisan, creative or executive. We must assume that a public is inexpert in its curiosity, intermittent, that it discerns only gross distinctions, is slow to be aroused and quickly diverted; that, since it acts by aligning itself, it personalizes whatever it considers, and is interested only when events have been melodramatized as a conflict.

The public will arrive in the middle of the third act and will leave before the last curtain, having stayed just long enough perhaps to decide who is the hero and who the villain of the piece. (Lippmann, 1927: 54–5)

## Summary

This review article has emphasized some of the contradictions between the ideals and the realities of a working democracy following from

- development towards an edited, 'journalistified' society,
- development towards a victimized society governed by single-case journalism and single-case politics,
- the existence of a basic asymmetry in the media's presentation of benefits and costs of major political interventions and
- the widespread rational ignorance concerning collective affairs.

Attention could have been called to other factors echoing the writings of Walter Lippmann but let these suffice.

It is not astonishing that many ask whether Lippmann was, in fact, an enemy of democracy arguing that Public Opinion and the Phantom Public added to a refutation of a democratic way of life. His views were born out of a fear that atomized individuals living in mass societies were susceptible to suggestion and, therefore, ill equipped for participation in democracy. The knowledge acquired by an educated elite, therefore, had to be transferred and may be translated to society at large by the press.

I think it is correct to argue that Lippmann was an elitist in the same manner as was Alexis de Tocqueville (1956[1835]: Ch. 56). But he was not an

enemy of democracy endorsing as he did a mechanism for majority rule as a means to channel the force which resides in the weight of numbers.

However it may be, in my interpretation the importance of Lippmann lies more in the questions he has raised than in the answers he provided. He has forced journalist educators to reflect on the epistemological basis of journalism and to recognize that there is no one-to-one relation between 'the outer world' and 'the pictures in our heads'. He demonstrated how public opinion follows from the latter and what this means for the democratic mechanism. He has given important contributions to reflections on the relations between the legislative and the executive branch. And he has – epistemologically and ontologically – anticipated the later debate on empiricism versus social construction.

Although Lippmann never commented on the problem that experts – Lippmann himself included – also have pictures in their heads as well as prejudices and stereotypes in their reasoning, there is no doubt that it is still worth revisiting Lippmann.

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**Biographical note**

**Jørn Henrik Petersen** was previously (1981–86) chairman of the regional daily Fyns Stiftstidende and he chaired the first board developing the second Danish national television channel TV2 (1986–94). In 1997 he designed a new education course for journalists in Denmark to run at the University of Southern Denmark. He is an economist by education specializing in the field of social policy and welfare economics. He currently chairs the Department of Journalism at the University of Southern Denmark, and he has recently (2002) been reappointed as chairman of Fyns Stiftstidende.

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