

The Media & Democracy

The United States was founded as an experiment in popular rule

- Public opinion would be expressed periodically through elections and as a constant pressure on officials.
- Public opinion, in turn, would be cultivated by a free and vigorous press

Is the 18th century equation of a free press, informed citizens and viable democracy too high a standard?

Walter Lippman thought so

- In *Liberty and the News* (1920), Lippman said that the crisis of modern democracy was a crisis in journalism:
- He believed that we are all captives to our own perceptions and to the images that are circulated by the press.

Lippman said:

- “We must go back of our opinions to the neutral facts for unity and refreshment of spirit.”
- “Public opinion deals with indirect, unseen, and puzzling facts, and there is nothing obvious about them.”

Lippman’s solution?

A totally objective press!

In 1922, Lippman published *Public Opinion*.

- He proposed that the foundations of American democracy had been eroded by modernity.
- There was simply too much information bombarding the average American to be absorbed usefully.
- He suggested that the rule of the people had become obsolete.
- There were simply too many people for a participatory democracy.
- The old belief that the world was relatively intelligible simply doesn’t hold in more complex modern times.

Lippman’s solution?

- Found a “central clearing house of intelligence” staffed by experts whose analysis would inform both the government’s decision makers and the press, and, via a trickle-down process, the public itself.
- Lippman proposed to restrict politics to only those capable of reason. His purpose... “...not to burden every citizen with expert opinions on all questions, but to push that burden away from him toward the responsible administrator.”

John Dewey kind of agreed... and kind of didn’t.

- John Dewey felt that democracy had been undermined by a tradition of individualism

that placed the individual above community....And all the individual was interested in was being entertained.

- He believed that the only way for the public to stay informed was a revitalized press.
- He visualized the art of communication and social inquiry coming together in the press.
- He envisioned a press that would rise above sensationalism to become a press that wedded insider information with popular appeal.

But, wait a minute. Who says the media are all that influential anyway?

Personal Influence, by Paul Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz, makes three central points:

- the mass media are not all-powerful dictators of opinion,
- some people (opinion leaders) act as filters for mediated messages, and
- primary groups, where people talk to each other, insulate against media persuasion.

The distilled message of this research was that the mass media have minimal effects.

As usual, not everyone agreed with that assessment either...

C. Wright Mills

American society for C. Wright Mills was 3-tiered:

- a top-level “elite of power,”
- a middle-level “drifting set of stalemated, balancing forces,”
- and a bottom level that is “politically fragmented and increasingly powerless—an emerging mass society.”
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Mills attributes massive persuasive power to the media:

- The media not only give us information; they guide our very experiences.
- Our standards of... reality tend to be set by these media....
- They have provided us with new identities and new aspirations of what we should like to be.
- Elite sources have no choice but to manipulate the news as best they can.

Robert Entman agrees

In *Democracy Without Citizens*, Robert Entman says that the media:

“are stymied on the demand side by the lack of public hunger for relevant information, and on the supply side by over-reliance on elite services and the industrial imperatives of efficiency and profits.”

John Durham Peters, a professor of communication studies at the University of Iowa, sums it all up this way:

“the ideological foundations of our media and political systems have been out of commission for ages and no one seems to have noticed.”

The reason for this is fairly simple:

- charges of betrayal or cynicism haunt anyone who speaks critically of the received ideals of democracy.

- If you believe in the possibility of an informed public, you're a fool, but if you don't, you're an elitist.

“An informing press and an enlightened public are at once necessary and impossible. The task of press theory today is to go one step further, to figure out new ideals commensurate with our present conditions.”