

DEMOCRACY

and the Media



“That awful power, the public opinion of a nation, is created in America by a horde of ignorant, self-complacent simpletons who failed at ditching and shoemaking and fetched up in journalism on their way to the poorhouse.”

Mark Twain

“The press is the best instrument for enlightening the mind of man.”

--Thomas Jefferson

“The sovereignty of the people and the freedom of the press are two entirely correlative things.”

--Alexis de Tocqueville

“Popular government without popular information and access to it would be but tragedy or a farce.”

--James Madison

WHAT IS PUBLIC OPINION ANYWAY?

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

But, 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*.



In it, 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."

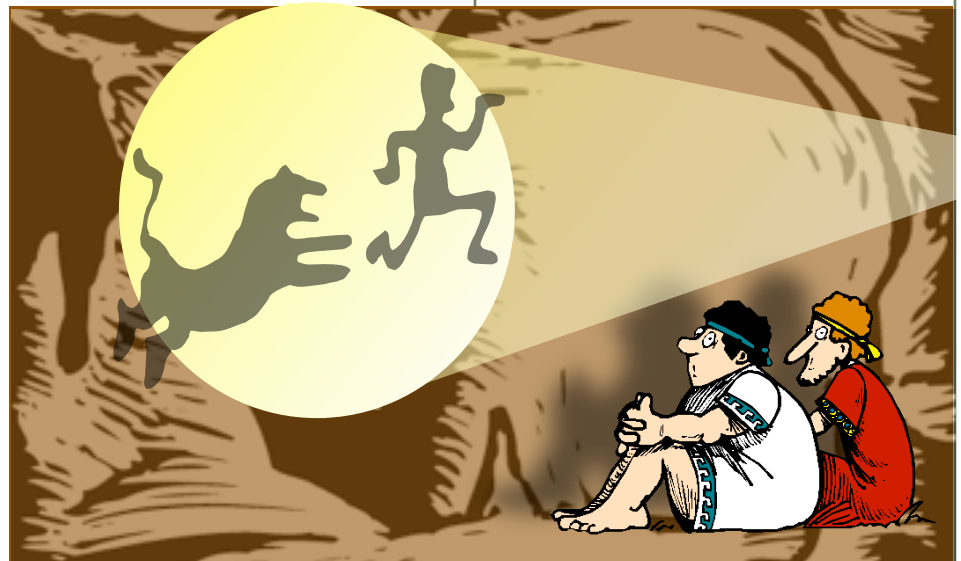


The Parable of Plato's Cave

In what is known as "the parable of the cave," Plato likens the existence of most human beings to that of slaves living in a darkened cave. These slaves are chained facing a large wall. Behind them, and unknown to them, a large fire is burning. Between that fire and the chained slaves are people, perpetually moving about, their shadows thrown upon the wall that the slaves must face. To the slaves, forever bound in place, these shadows and the sounds they hear coming from the moving figures are all there is of reality. It is this reality that the slaves talk and think about, since it is all they know. In order to break the bonds of this "reality," a person would have to free himself from his chains, turn around, and face the fire and the people moving to and fro in front of it. However, such an experience would probably be so

frightening that it would result in the slave wishing to return to his original reality. And if the slave were forced to go to the surface, outside the cave, the experience of the blinding and vast panorama of this new reality would be nearly overwhelming. Even

supposing that the slave became used to the reality of the world, he would never be able to explain it to his fellow slaves if he returned to the darkness of the cave, because their frame of reference wouldn't include these possibilities.



John Dewey kind of agreed...

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.

All the individual was interested in was being entertained.



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.”

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.”

- The professional norms of objectivity serve not to safeguard the truth but to shield the media, to give power to the official sources, and to confuse the public with messages that can be read only by insiders.
- Entman believes that a press that is more partisan and contentious would

sooner create an informed public than one that is pretentiously neutral.

John Durham Peters sums it all up this way:

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."



• The trouble is that the stupid people-- who constitute the grand overwhelming majority of this and all other nations-- do believe and are moulded and convinced by what they get out of a newspaper, and there is where the harm lies.

Mark Twain