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The Unattainable Ideal: Walter Lippmann and the Limits of the Press and Public Opinion

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THE UNATTAINABLE IDEAL:
WALTER LIPPMANN AND THE LIMITS OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC OPINION

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Mass Communication

in

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by
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ABSTRACT

Walter Lippmann's classic work, *Public Opinion*, crystallized thinking about the dynamic relationship between the press and public opinion, and clarified the role of each in democracy. Evaluations of that book, however, tend to be one-dimensional. *Public Opinion* captured just one iteration of his thinking on the subject, not his final statement on the matter. A comprehensive survey of his writing reveals Lippmann's views on the press and public opinion were not static, yet the attention *Public Opinion* receives continues to overshadow his other works; his evolving views on the press and public opinion are rarely mentioned. Although his views shifted in significant ways over the decades, those changes hewed to a familiar set of issues and oscillated between a fairly narrow set of differences. Lippmann's primary concern was always the functioning of democracy. He wanted it to work. His views on the press and public opinion revolved around a central tenet of progressive thinking – that an informed public would reach reasoned conclusions. But Lippmann always wrestled with doubts about the capacity of the electorate; his elitist attitudes conflicted with his reformist sympathies. Could the public really govern itself intelligently? How could the press, with its own limitations, facilitate that process? Lippmann puzzled over the answers to those questions throughout his career. Ultimately, his experiences with the manufacture of consent during World War I undermined his confidence in public opinion; his stature as a member of the press coincided with greater hope in that institution.

PART I

INTRODUCTION

He has been referred to as “one of the most important figures of American history in the 20th century,” although some variation on “the most gifted and influential American political journalist of the twentieth century” is the most common refrain used to describe the Pulitzer Prize winning columnist and author Walter Lippmann.¹ One encounters no shortage of superlatives to describe his career, which has been characterized as “without parallel in the American press, his life an extraordinary record of the conflicts which wracked the twentieth century.”² On more subdued occasions, Lippmann is modestly referred to as the “dean of American journalists.”³

Lippmann wrote his first editorial, for his school’s student paper the *Junior Record*, in 1903, when he was thirteen years old.⁴ He left Harvard three weeks prior to completing a master’s degree in philosophy for what turned out to be a brief, seven-week stint at *Boston Common*, his future father-in-law’s reformist weekly paper. Unhappy there, Lippmann appealed to Lincoln Steffens for more fulfilling work and soon began an apprenticeship with the famed muckraker at *Everybody’s* magazine.

¹ Cesar Garcia, “Rethinking Walter Lippmann’s Legacy in the History of Public Relations,” *Prism* 7, no. 1 (2010): 1. Michael Curtis, “Walter Lippmann Reconsidered,” *Society* (Jan./Feb. 1991): 23.

² Jay Rosen, “Impossible Press: American Journalism and the Decline of Public Life” (PhD diss., New York University, 1986), 269.

³ Edward Weeks, introduction, *Conversations with Walter Lippmann* (Boston: Little Brown, 1965), vii. Lippmann has also been referred to as the “dean of American political columnists” and the “dean of American publicists.”

⁴ Lippmann edited the paper with a childhood friend who recalled: “The editorials all began with the solemn assertion: ‘We, the Editors of the Record, sincerely believe.’” Carl Binger, “A Child of the Enlightenment,” in *Walter Lippmann and His Times*, ed. Marquis Childs and James Reston (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1959), 27.

Lippmann began his formal journalism career in 1914 as a founding editor of the progressive weekly magazine, *The New Republic*. His first book, *A Preface to Politics*, had been published the previous year. After the United States entered World War I, Lippmann joined the war effort, first as an assistant to Secretary of War Newton Baker, then as the youngest member of the Inquiry, a secret group of specialists charged with preparing data for peace negotiations following the war.⁵

Lippmann later went to Europe as a captain in the Army, where he engaged in propaganda efforts in support of the Allies, but returned home disillusioned not long after President Wilson arrived in Paris for the peace conference. In 1922, the same year his classic work *Public Opinion* was published, Lippmann joined the *New York World*, taking over the editorial page in 1924 after the death of Frank Cobb. When the *World* folded in 1931, Ogden Reid lured Lippmann to the conservative *New York Herald Tribune*, a union that struck many as curious, considering Lippmann's liberal-leanings. It was at the *Herald Tribune* that Lippmann launched "Today and Tomorrow," his syndicated column on world affairs. He carried on for 36 years, taking it with him for one last move to the *Washington Post* in 1963. In between his newspaper obligations, Lippmann wrote dozens of books, contributed articles to magazines, gave lectures, made speeches and conferred with statesmen.

⁵ Sue Curry Jansen, "'The World's Greatest Adventure in Advertising:' Walter Lippmann's Critique of Censorship and Propaganda," in *The Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies*, ed. Jonathan Auerbach and Russ Castronovo (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 302.

Throughout his long career, Lippmann occupied a rarefied position in public affairs, influencing public opinion as a journalist and U.S. policy as a counselor to presidents, politicians and military officers.⁶ As Jay Rosen explained, “His daily column was read by millions of ordinary people who depended on Lippmann to tell them what to think. The influence this gave him meant extraordinary access to leaders and events.”⁷ Held up as an exemplar of the profession and lauded as “the last of the great political columnists,” it has been noted that Lippmann’s political maneuvering is a “contrary example” of how a modern, ideally objective press conducts itself.⁸ “Lippmann never did have a rigid belief in journalistic celibacy...he promoted friends for office, plotted strategies, intrigued behind the scenes, all unbeknownst to his readers.”⁹

The three-sided relationship between the press, the public and the government, and how it contributed to a viable democracy, was the dominant theme of many of Lippmann’s books and articles. Remarking on Lippmann’s access to American power brokers, the size of his national audience, and his courting by heads of state across Europe, Rosen wrote, “One does not lead a life like this and develop an ordinary political philosophy. When Lippmann stepped back to ponder a problem, he stepped back from a world which had welcomed him all the way inside. In 1919, for example, he wrote editorials about the Fourteen Points he had earlier helped Woodrow Wilson to draft.”¹⁰

⁶ Garcia, 1.

⁷ Rosen, 270.

⁸ Thomas Griffith, “Comrade of the Powerful,” *Time*, Sept. 15, 1980, 86.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Rosen, 271.

Lippmann's journalism career spanned six decades, and during that time, the world changed, the profession changed, and his views changed as well. His best-known work explored the relationship between the press and public opinion, and crystallized thinking about that relationship. Evaluations of that work, however, have been one-dimensional, as if *Public Opinion* were his final statement on the matter when it was only one marker on a long road of thought. Lippmann took up the subject in books, newspaper columns, editorials and magazine articles, and in letters to colleagues and friends. Specifically, no one has identified *everything* Lippmann wrote about the press and public opinion. This study takes up that twin challenge. But first I'll provide an overview of his body of work. This introduction is brief; his oeuvre is not.

PART I; CHAPTER ONE
SURVEYING WALTER LIPPMAN'S BODY OF WORK

Walter Lippmann was a prolific writer. Between 1913 and 1961, he published 27 books.¹¹ Between 1909 and 1971, he wrote more than 7,000 editorials, newspaper columns, and magazine articles.¹² In the introduction to a collection of his writings, *The Essential Lippmann*, the editors estimated Lippmann had written more than 10 million words.¹³ That book was published in 1963, eight years before Lippmann wrote his final article for *Newsweek*, and four years before he gave up his syndicated “Today and Tomorrow” feature.¹⁴ As a *New York Times* reviewer once marveled, when Lippmann’s first book came out, “No man could have foreseen the prose river he was prefacing. Not even Lippmann. The generations pass. Walter Lippmann goes marching on serenely, urbanely, alertly.”¹⁵

Plotting the course of Lippmann’s evolving views on the press and public opinion demands a comprehensive survey of the whole of his writings. That required identifying everything he wrote on these topics. My inquiry began with his books, my efforts focused on those volumes, chapters and passages in which Lippmann expressly addressed issues related to the press and public opinion. From these readings, I noted Lippmann’s stated

¹¹ Thirteen of Lippmann’s books are reprints of lectures or collections of newspaper columns or magazine articles. Six books focus on foreign policy.

¹² A complete, indexed collection of original “Today and Tomorrow” columns can be found in the Robert O. Anthony collection at Yale. In 1931, as a hobby, Anthony began collecting articles, newspaper clippings, pamphlets and other published works written by or about Lippmann. In 1946, Anthony was named curator Yale’s Lippmann collection.

¹³ Clinton Rossiter and James Lare, eds., *The Essential Lippmann: A Political Philosophy for Liberal Democracy* (New York: Random House, 1963), xii.

¹⁴ When asked by the *New York Times* why he was discontinuing the column, Lippmann retorted, “Well, I’ll tell you this, it wasn’t Lyndon Johnson.”

¹⁵ Charles Poore, “Lippmann Sometimes Scares Us in the Morning,” *New York Times*, Aug. 19, 1965.

views on the topic, and sketched a preliminary outline to track his evolution, organized around the dominant themes in his writing.

Next, I looked at what Lippmann wrote about the press and public opinion as a journalist: the editorials he wrote at the *New Republic* and the *New York World*, his “Today and Tomorrow” columns from his many years at the *New York Herald Tribune*, and later, the *Washington Post*, and his articles for publications like the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Vanity Fair* and *Newsweek*.

The finding aid for the Robert O. Anthony collection of Walter Lippmann at Yale University catalogues every known article, book or essay written by or about Lippmann.¹⁶ This resource represents the entire body of Lippmann’s work. The finding aid also served as a field guide for tracking down articles and an instruction manual for assembling a comprehensive list of Lippmann’s writings on the press and public opinion. For his newspaper and magazine work, the finding aid lists the publications alphabetically, followed by a chronological listing of the dates Lippmann’s articles appeared in the publication. The interlibrary loan staff at LSU’s Middleton Library secured four reels from the Robert O. Anthony collection for my review: Series I: Magazines, reel 1 – more than 350 articles written by Lippmann for more than 50 magazines, starting with his 1903 article for his student paper and ending with his final column for *Newsweek* on January 11, 1971; Series II: Newspapers, reel 4 – a scrapbook of Lippmann’s unsigned *New York World* editorials from 1922 through July 1923; reel 5 – the entire *New York World* editorial page for each day, March 1924-March 1926, and

¹⁶ The collection, originally curated in 1978, does not appear to have been updated since.

reel 11 – which contained some of his earliest work, including the articles he wrote while at the *Boston Common*.

As I read about Lippmann, I kept a running list of references to relevant articles and columns cited in studies and books. I consulted the LSU library catalog, publication archives, and conducted online searches to locate these articles. Some of his writings can be found in the following collections of Lippmann’s work: *Force and Ideas: The Early Writings* (1970), a collection of 67 Lippmann editorials from the *New Republic*, annotated by historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.; *Interpretations: 1931-1932* and *Interpretations: 1933-1935*, selections of “Today and Tomorrow” columns, edited by journalist and historian Allan Nevins; *The Essential Lippmann* (1963), a selection of 61 writings from Lippmann’s books, articles, columns, editorials and pamphlets; and *Conversations with Walter Lippmann* (1965), transcriptions of his much-lauded CBS interviews in the 1960s.¹⁷

As part of my systematic review of Lippmann’s views, I also searched his private writings for statements regarding the press and public opinion. Sterling Memorial Library at Yale University houses the Walter Lippmann papers, an archival collection consisting of 163.5 linear feet of correspondence, drafts, manuscripts, school records and engagement books. Much of the collection is made available for inter-library loan on 170 reels of microfilm.

Walter Lippmann wrote and received reams of mail. His personal correspondence, available to scholars in his and others’ archival collections, offers another avenue to

¹⁷ Upon reading this collection of his transcribed interviews, Lippmann responded “My God, what syntax!” Ronald Steel, *Walter Lippmann and the American Century* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1999), 517.

assess the evolution of his views on the press and public opinion.¹⁸ Lippmann enjoyed correspondence with an impressive roster of influential people throughout his 60-year career—presidents, ambassadors, military officers, academics and other prominent journalists. As a public figure, Lippmann also received an abundance of what we might today consider junk mail: a steady stream of requests from both acquaintances and strangers to join various committees, to endorse a variety of causes and to advise aspiring journalists inspired by his career.¹⁹ Readers of his syndicated column sometimes carried on years-long, one-sided communication with Lippmann, all of which is preserved in the Yale archives. It is estimated that from 1906, the year he entered Harvard, until his death in 1974, Lippmann wrote twenty thousand letters.²⁰ He amassed an overwhelming volume of correspondence over the course of seven decades.

As with his public, published writings, my study focuses on letters in which Lippmann conveyed his thoughts on the press and public opinion. As befits his career, Lippmann’s correspondence contains recurring references to both issues. Letters in the Lippmann collection also reveal the role he played in shaping public opinion about public affairs, not only through his newspaper columns, but in advising politicians and

¹⁸ This task hinges on the ability to decode Lippmann’s notoriously bad handwriting. Even his oldest friends found it difficult: “I infer (though I am not sure) that you like what you have read of my book. The fact is, I am a little rusty at deciphering cuneiform.” Carl Binger to Lippmann, March 22, 1945, Walter Lippmann Papers, Yale University Library, New Haven, CT (hereafter cited as WLP). Lippmann clarified his original message in a type-written reply: “I certainly do like your book, but why you can’t read my handwriting when you are supposed to be able to read people’s minds I can’t imagine...” Lippmann to Binger, a psychiatrist, March 24, 1945, WLP.

¹⁹ Or, on at least one occasion, to advocate on behalf of the lowly hotdog: “We ask that you, as a moulder of public opinion, consider the frankfurter.” Frank M. Firor, president, Adolf Gobel, Inc., to Lippmann, August 26, 1929, WLP.

²⁰ John Morton Blum, ed., *Public Philosopher: Selected Letters of Walter Lippmann* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1985), vii.

proposing strategies to rally support for policies. Tracking his behind-the-scenes involvement in political events, as well as his official positions during WWI, with his publicly stated positions adds context to the evolution of Lippmann's views.

Employing the finding aid for the Walter Lippmann papers, I determined the reels of correspondence that appeared to contain material most relevant to this study. In total, I reviewed 73 reels of microfilm from the collection: 34 reels from Series I, containing selected correspondence from 1906-1930; 34 reels from Series III, selected correspondence from 1931-1974; one reel from Series VII, diaries and engagement books; and four reels of correspondence and general files from Series I in the 2001 accession. I also viewed Lippmann correspondence found in the Newton D. Baker archives and in the Edward M. House papers at the Library of Congress.

To round out my portrait of Lippmann, I read what others have written about him. Ronald Steel's *Walter Lippmann and the American Century*, considered the definitive biography of Lippmann, provides a thorough overview of his career and personal life. It is an excellent introduction to Lippmann and the people and events that influenced his worldview. *Walter Lippmann and His Times* is a charming book of essays contributed by his friends in honor of his 70th birthday. I looked at reviews of his books to gauge how Lippmann's views were received at the time they were published. Also, book reviews written by his contemporaries, including H.L. Mencken, John Dewey and Charles Merriam, for insight into the reactions of Lippmann's peers, or, in the case of former President Theodore Roosevelt, who reviewed *Drift and Mastery* for *Outlook* magazine, the reaction of Lippmann's hero.

PART I; CHAPTER TWO

A REVIEW OF THE SCHOLARSHIP ON WALTER LIPPMAN

Many a public figure has come to imitate the journalism which describes him.
Walter Lippmann, *A Preface to Politics*

The literature on Lippmann confirms his continued appeal to scholars. Lippmann studies address topics as varied as his foreign policy views, his political philosophies, his influence on mass communication research, and his so-called “debate” with philosopher John Dewey. His political views, particularly his supposed denouncement of liberal ideology, seem to hold great fascination for scholars.²¹ Indeed, the overwhelming motif in Lippmann studies is change. His critics more pointedly emphasize examples of his inconsistency. Reviews of his second book, *Drift and Mastery*, noted the discrepancies between it and *A Preface to Politics*, published only the year before. “And, though his diagnosis departed drastically from what he had published little more than a year earlier, he confessed no error.”²²

Owing to the scope of Lippmann’s writing, few studies fit neatly into a single category of inquiry. The longevity of his career almost inevitably invites at least a cursory overview of his historical relevance. And regardless if the primary focus of a study is on his philosophy or his foreign affairs policies, Lippmann’s political views rarely escape mention.

²¹ It seems some authors conflate charges of Lippmann harboring anti-democratic views with suggestions he adopted a conservative political ideology.

²² William E. Leuchtenburg, introduction to reprint of *Drift and Mastery* (1914) by Walter Lippmann (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 6. In this revised edition, Leuchtenburg consulted Lippmann’s original draft, handwritten in the summers of 1913 and 1914. Lippmann wrote all of his books and columns in longhand; his original manuscripts can be found in the Walter Lippmann collection at Yale University.

Historical studies

Lippmann retains marquee status in historical journalism studies, often deployed as “shorthand” to embody post-World War I changes in the press and the culture at large. “This conflation is evident outside communications as well: the title of Ronald Steel’s impressive biography, *Walter Lippmann and the American Century*, suggests that to chronicle Lippmann’s life is tantamount to detailing the collective experience of a major twentieth century nation.”²³ Lippmann’s first two books, *A Preface to Politics* and *Drift and Mastery*, are widely considered to reflect the optimistic mood of the progressive era. The two editors of a 1963 collection of his writings are so confident of the timelessness of Lippmann’s talent and his standing among journalists, they feel assured “he may be honored for his achievements by the men of centuries to come.”²⁴

World War I

Many studies look to a defining moment to signal a change in Lippmann’s various views; War World I is the most frequently cited and mutually agreed upon event influencing his views on politics, the press and public opinion.²⁵ “The pragmatist’s desire to reshape the world collapsed with the Versailles settlement, and Lippmann wondered whether democracy, dependent as it is on the will of the governed, can rely on an electorate sufficiently informed to understand what is happening in the world.”²⁶ Sue

²³ Gretchen Soderlund, “Rethinking a Curricular Icon: The Institutional and Ideological Foundations of Walter Lippmann,” *Communication Review* 8 (2005): 309-310.

²⁴ Rossiter and Lare, vi.

²⁵ Sue Curry Jansen, *Walter Lippmann: A Critical Introduction to Media and Communication Theory* (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 8.

²⁶ John Patrick Diggins, “From Pragmatism to Natural Law: Walter Lippmann’s Quest for Legitimacy,” *Political Theory* 19, no. 4 (Nov. 1991): 526.

Curry Jansen disagrees. She argues that in *Liberty and the News*, his first post-WWI book, “Lippmann’s approach to observation, method, truth-telling *and science* is grounded in pragmatism and humanism.”²⁷ She feels others’ views on the book often amount to a “misreading of his message.”²⁸

In an interview in 1969, just before his eightieth birthday, Lippmann was asked what events influenced his life. His response seems to indicate the consensus at least has the timeline correct: “The first, I suppose, was the First World War, for which I was entirely unprepared in my mind,” he said. “That was the beginning of my first awareness of what the world was about.”²⁹

Lippmann’s experience during the war – his propaganda work, his realization that news coverage of the war was routinely slanted – “jarred (him) profoundly,”³⁰ and his writing assumed an urgent tone post-World War I; in a way, he epitomized the mood of the nation during that era.³¹ “Social histories of news and public relations have used Lippmann to characterize a cultural mood of detachment that emerged during and after World War I. In these accounts, Lippmann’s views on objectivity, science, and expert knowledge exemplify the postwar cultural and historical order.”³²

²⁷ Jansen, in *Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies*, 315.

²⁸ Jansen, in *Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies*, 314.

²⁹ Henry Brandon, “A Talk with Walter Lippmann, at 80, About ‘This Minor Dark Age,’” *New York Times*, September 14, 1969.

³⁰ Sidney Kaplan, “Social Engineers as Saviors: Effects of World War I on Some American Liberals,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 17, no. 3 (June 1956): 365.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Soderlund, 309.

Political ideology

In reviewing the literature, Lippmann's political ideology emerges as a major preoccupation of scholars.³³ The notion that he abandoned his liberal ideals and adopted an increasingly conservative point of view is one of the most popular tropes in studies of his work. "No contemporary who read Lippmann's early books and followed his career could have predicted where his thinking would take him by midcentury."³⁴ So how did a former socialist turned crusading progressive, a self-avowed life-long liberal arrive at the point where critics accused him of championing conservatism? If change is the most popular subject for scholarly investigation involving Lippmann, then *Public Opinion* is the most popular source of evidence. It's his signal work, the one his other books are compared to. It was also the first work to arouse accusations that Lippmann harbored anti-democratic views.

Anti-democratic

When not examined exclusively, *Public Opinion* is sometimes compared or contrasted with Lippmann's other works; often, his books are considered in pairs. Anthony Giambusso evaluates *Public Opinion* and *The Phantom Public* through the lens of pragmatic philosophy principles, concluding "Lippmann's critique of democracy results in prescriptions which are clearly, as he himself admits, undemocratic...Lippmann has proposed a profound challenge to traditional democratic assumptions."³⁵

³³ Steven Blum, "Walter Lippmann: Ideas, Events, and the Cosmopolitan Outlook" (PhD diss., Brandeis University, 1982), 9.

³⁴ Diggins, 522.

³⁵ Anthony Giambusso. "Is Propaganda Pragmatic?" (PhD diss., Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, May 2006), 19.

Lippmann went even further in *The Phantom Public* and *Essays in the Public Philosophy*. Both books are regarded as indictments of American democracy, leading to charges that Lippmann was “anti-democratic.” John Patrick Diggins writes that both *Public Opinion* and *The Phantom Public* “challenge the validity of liberal democracy by suggesting that to invest authority in the people may be foolish when people’s thoughts are determined by the distortions of the mode of information.”³⁶ Diggins concludes that *Essays in the Public Philosophy* was “the conservative culmination of years of searching for radical and liberal solutions to the dilemmas of modernity.”³⁷

Heinz Eulau writes that although the sentiments in *Essays in The Public Philosophy* are expressed more forcefully than those in *Public Opinion*, the theses of these two books are essentially the same. With *Essays in the Public Philosophy*, Eulau believes Lippmann reached “the logical conclusion” of the concepts he first explored 30 years earlier in *Public Opinion*, namely that the public is incapable of giving “genuine” as opposed to “manufactured consent.”³⁸ “Even in 1922, Lippmann’s judgment of the incompetence of the masses betrayed the emotional fiber of conservatism in his make-up rather than that skeptical and experimental temper of mind characteristic of the liberal.”³⁹ The implication is that Lippmann’s questioning of the soundness of majority rule shaped by public opinion is a “reconsideration of his earlier hopes for democracy’s revitalization,” which in turn is seen as a reflection of his political ideology.⁴⁰

³⁶ Diggins, 526.

³⁷ Diggins, 522.

³⁸ Heinz Eulau, “From Public Opinion to Public Philosophy: Walter Lippmann’s Classic Reexamined,” *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 15, no. 4 (July 1956): 449.

³⁹ Eulau, “From Public Opinion to Public Philosophy,” 450.

⁴⁰ Diggins, 526.

Inconsistency as an indicator of change

Change, a predominant theme of many Lippmann studies, is typically presented negatively, usually as evidence of his innate conservatism. This approach to Lippmann's work tends to gauge his changing views primarily as an indicator of his political temperament. The inclination to delineate Lippmann's ideological leanings along political lines "has been very common. The assumption has been that it changed every ten years."⁴¹ Others reject that tendency as an oversimplification of the development of Lippmann's political thought, arguing, "the liberal versus conservative formula does little to illumine Lippmann's theoretical statements as they evolved over the decades... The author is marked as having fallen from grace for diverging from opinions that antedated his thirtieth birthday."⁴² Early in his career, Lippmann, writing about Woodrow Wilson, a man about whom he had a serious change of heart, stated: "I see no virtue in the picture of the strong, obstinate, consistent man who never learns and never forgets."⁴³ Despite the protestations of his defenders and Lippmann's own declarations, the tendency remains to emphasize instances of his conflicting opinions. "The charge of ambivalence and inconsistency has been the major and most frequent criticism made of Lippmann's works."⁴⁴

⁴¹ Frederic Krome, "From Liberal Philosophy to Conservative Ideology? Walter Lippmann's Opposition to the New Deal," *Journal of American Culture*: 62.

⁴² Steven Blum, 9.

⁴³ Walter Lippmann, "The Case for Wilson," *New Republic*, VIII, October 14, 1916.

⁴⁴ Janice Scott Anderson, "The Rhetorical Theory and Practice of Walter Lippmann: Advocacy Journalism as Rhetorical Discourse" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison: 1981), 72.

New Deal

His opposition to President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal policies is considered the turning point in his political ideology, the era when the famously liberal Lippmann transformed into "a conservative thinker."⁴⁵ David Weingast sought to quantify Lippmann's views on those policies by modeling the content-analysis technique Lippmann and Charles Merz employed in "A Test of the News."⁴⁶ Weingast divided the policies into eight distinct categories, and, reading every "Today and Tomorrow" column written between 1932 and 1938, coded Lippmann's references to each policy as favorable, unfavorable or neutral. Although Lippmann initially supported Roosevelt's program, the content analysis indicates that Lippmann's views on the New Deal policies were, on the whole, unfavorable.⁴⁷ Weingast cites these results to suggest that Lippmann's public persona is at odds with his writings, advancing the charge of inconsistency. Weingast advocates adopting quantifiable research methods to encourage objectivity in historical studies, arguing that works based on subjective interpretations "abound in myths based on unsupported generalizations. Fragmentary evidence is still being dignified as universal truth."⁴⁸

Frederic Krome adopts the contrary view; he contends that Lippmann's views did not change during the New Deal era, rather, circumstances changed and Lippmann adapted his positions in light of the new reality. Krome argues that the flaw in Weingast's study, and in others focused on Lippmann's inconsistencies, is that the New Deal policies

⁴⁵ Krome, 57.

⁴⁶ David Weingast, "Walter Lippmann: A Content Analysis," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (Summer 1950): 296-302.

⁴⁷ Weingast, 302.

⁴⁸ Weingast, 302.

are treated as “constant” whereas Lippmann’s views on those policies are seen as “variable.”⁴⁹ Lippmann’s friend and fellow journalist Marquis Childs also defended Lippmann against charges that his criticism of the New Deal signaled an abandonment of his principles. “During the era of the New Deal, when not to be for the brave new world was to be against it, old friends broke crossly with a critic who persisted in being critical,” Childs wrote. “The intolerable affront was that one so obviously of a liberal and humane view should not subscribe with all his heart to the effort to remake the old order.”⁵⁰

Public Opinion

Although the New Deal era is considered the turning point in Lippmann’s political philosophy, *Public Opinion* is seen as the book in which those changes first manifest. “In many respects, *Public Opinion* was the liberal Lippmann’s farewell to liberalism. The actual denouement would not come for many years, but the ground had been well ploughed.”⁵¹ His most enduring book, the classic *Public Opinion* has been hailed as “his most original contribution to political thought, social psychology, and the study of mass communications.”⁵² In this work, Lippmann explicitly explored the relationship between the press and public opinion, the concept most closely associated with his legacy. It is also the book that receives the most attention from scholars: “If he

⁴⁹ Krome, 62.

⁵⁰ Marquis Childs, “Introduction: The Conscience of the Critic,” in Childs and Reston, 1-2.

⁵¹ Eulau, “From Public Opinion to Public Philosophy,” 450.

⁵² Curtis, 24.

had written nothing in his life except *Public Opinion*, he would be quoted and studied for generations to come.”⁵³

Lippmann’s “pioneering” critique in *Public Opinion* challenged the assumption that news was, or could be, an accurate reflection of the world around us.⁵⁴ “Lippmann’s *Public Opinion* was... an attempt to introduce a contrary idea – namely, that the world cannot be mirrored in the news because it is a joint product of the perceiver and the perceived, both for journalists and, more importantly, for the public.”⁵⁵

The conviction that ‘the trouble lies deeper’ than the conduct of the press has helped make *Public Opinion* a classic of modern political thought. For the press had been traditionally put forward as the solution to every weakness in democratic theory.... By stating emphatically that the press was *not* enough... a whole world of assumptions about how people form an understanding of public questions then began to collapse, including those of the journalism profession.⁵⁶

Public Opinion maintains its relevance – and its interest to scholars—because Lippmann “foresaw two of the most challenging, intertwined problems of democracy: the absence of the omniscient citizen and the inability of the news media to help citizens achieve minimal competence...it was the skeptical and erudite Lippmann who first (and most eloquently) brought us the bad news.”⁵⁷ Rereading *Public Opinion* decades after its publication, one critic was “struck, above all, by Lippmann’s uncanny ability to

⁵³ Rossiter and Lare, xviii.

⁵⁴ Eulau, “From Public Opinion to Public Philosophy,” 446.

⁵⁵ Rosen, 283.

⁵⁶ Rosen, 278-279.

⁵⁷ Susan Herbst, “Walter Lippmann’s *Public Opinion* Revisited,” *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 4, no. 88 (1999): 89-90.

anticipate later developments in the study of public opinion and mass communications.”⁵⁸

One modern scholar describes it as “eerily prophetic.”⁵⁹

Lippmann’s philosophical influences

Although he is recognized foremost as a journalist, some scholars approach Lippmann primarily as a philosopher.⁶⁰ Lippmann acknowledged the presumably competing yet ultimately complementary forces guiding his career. “I have lived two lives, one of books and one of newspapers,” he wrote. “Each helps the other. The philosophy is the context in which I write my books. The column is the laboratory or clinic on which I test the philosophy and keep it from becoming too abstract.”⁶¹

Washington Post editor Phillip Geylin referred to Lippmann as “a philosopher with a deadline.”⁶²

Throughout numerous studies parsing Lippmann’s views on various topics, one area of consensus that emerges is how the philosophies espoused by three Harvard professors shaped Lippmann’s thinking. The influences of William James, George Santayana and Graham Wallas are apparent, to varying degrees, in Lippmann’s writing, although disagreement remains as to which philosopher made the greater contribution to Lippmann’s body of work.⁶³ “There has been much controversy among scholars as to who left the deeper impressions upon Lippmann’s thinking – James or Santayana. The

⁵⁸ Eulau, “From Public Opinion to Public Philosophy,” 439.

⁵⁹ Soderlund, 317.

⁶⁰ Krome, 63.

⁶¹ James Reston, “Conclusion: The Mockingbird and the Taxicab,” in Childs, 227.

⁶² Anderson, 67.

⁶³ Anderson, 32.

influence of Wallas has been less disputed.”⁶⁴ In a footnote in *Drift and Mastery*, Lippmann acknowledged the debt his first two books owed to Wallas’s influence. “I had the privilege of reading Mr. Wallas’s book (*The Great Society*) in manuscript while I was revising this one,” Lippmann wrote. “My obligations go far deeper than that, however, for they extend back to the spring of 1910, when Mr. Wallas came from England to lecture at Harvard. In *A Preface to Politics* I tried to express my sense of the way in which Graham Wallas marks a turning point in the history of political thinking.”⁶⁵

“William James,” Steel writes, “was a liberating influence on an entire generation.”⁶⁶ His optimistic philosophy was irresistible to idealistic young men like Lippmann, who was attracted to James’ “passion for social reform, commitment to experimentation, abhorrence of dogma, and deep sense of personal morals.”⁶⁷ James ignited Lippmann’s passion for science, and his pragmatic influence is evident in *A Preface to Politics* and *Drift and Mastery*, which “resonate with hope, despite the awareness of the complexity of problems facing America and the world,” a marked contrast to the prescriptions later found in *Public Opinion*.⁶⁸ Among Lippmann’s earliest published pieces – his first signed article for *Everybody’s* magazine – was a tribute to William James: “James was no more afraid of a new political theory than he was of ghosts, and he was no more afraid of proclaiming a new theory, or an old one, than he

⁶⁴ Anderson, 42.

⁶⁵ Lippmann, *Drift and Mastery*, 39.

⁶⁶ Steel, 17.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Diggins, 522.

was of being a ghost. I think he would have listened with an open mind to the devil's account of heaven, and I'm sure he would have heard him out on hell."⁶⁹

Lippmann enrolled in every class George Santayana taught at Harvard, and was the philosopher's "star pupil" and research assistant. From Santayana, Lippmann "learned the importance of writing gracefully as well as clearly...to value the classical virtues of measure and restraint...Except for the exuberant books of his early youth, Lippmann's works bear the imprint of Santayana's search for a reality beyond experience."⁷⁰

In an interview a few days before his eightieth birthday, Lippmann reflected on his mentors, telling the interviewer, "James, I think, made me see how a human reaction to problems ought to be. But what he taught I found less convincing than what Santayana taught."⁷¹ When asked to name the men who most influenced him, Lippmann included British economist John Maynard Keynes and Harvard professor Irving Babbitt along with James, Santayana and Wallas.

By including Babbitt on the list, Lippmann lent some credence to the charge that he grew more conservative in his later years. As a student at Harvard, Lippmann was repelled by Babbitt's argument that "democracy itself rested on restraining the power of the majority," although that sentiment hews closely to the premise Lippmann progressively built upon in his books.⁷² At the time, the young socialist considered Babbitt's views "elitist." Despite Lippmann's initial distaste for Babbitt's worldview, "a

⁶⁹ Lippmann, "William James: An Open Mind," *Everybody's*, December 1910.

⁷⁰ Steel, 21.

⁷¹ In a *New York Times* interview on Sept. 14, 1969, Lippmann initially named James, Santayana, Wallas and Keynes, who, he said, influenced his view on economics: "In fact, I hope I'm a Keynesian." He added Babbitt to the list in reply to a follow-up question.

⁷² Steel, 19. Lippmann refers to "the tyranny of the majority" in his first book.

decade later he was a good deal closer to Babbitt than to James.”⁷³ It was not long before Lippmann would be accused of harboring elitist and “antimajoritarian” attitudes himself.

Jansen, again, disagrees with this characterization of Lippmann as an elitist or anti-democratic. “Reading Lippmann’s diagnosis as prescriptive rather than descriptive, (critics) have inverted and subverted his arguments about censorship and propaganda.”⁷⁴

She also challenges the notion that Lippmann considers himself smarter than everyone else. “It should be noted that, since arrogance and elitism are often ascribed to Lippmann, when he described the limits of human knowledge and counseled humility, he always included himself within the circle of the limited in need of humility.”⁷⁵

Not everyone considers it unreasonable that Lippmann’s views would evolve over “a lifespan that extended from the horse-and-buggy age to the space age.”⁷⁶ Following his career trajectory, Janice Anderson notes, as Lippmann’s platform and audience expanded, so did his influence: “On the *New Republic* he had basically addressed the ‘intelligentsia.’ On the *World*, he had primarily addressed a metropolitan audience. With the ‘Today and Tomorrow’ column appearing in more than 200 newspapers and reaching an estimated ten million readers, he addressed the whole country and many parts of the world.”⁷⁷

Lippmann is credited with articulating the modern understanding of public opinion, so it is hardly surprising that *Public Opinion* is his most frequently cited work. He enjoyed a long and successful career as a journalist, so it is no surprise he developed strong opinions – and often expressed sharp criticism – about the role of the press. What

⁷³ Steel, 19.

⁷⁴ Jansen, in *Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies*, 317.

⁷⁵ Jansen, in *Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies*, 315.

⁷⁶ Jansen, *Walter Lippmann: A Critical Introduction*, 11.

⁷⁷ Anderson, 59.

is surprising, considering his status, the longevity of his career, and the frequency with which he returned to the topic, is that no analysis maps how his views on the press and public opinion evolved over the course of his lifetime. Surprising, in that no study examines how Lippmann arrived at, and later departed from, the major theme he addressed in *Public Opinion* – the relationship between the press and public opinion – in conjunction with what he wrote about those subjects in his newspaper articles and editorials, his correspondence, and his other books.

In an address to guests at the National Press Club on the occasion of his seventieth birthday, Lippmann may have inadvertently revealed a key consideration for assessing the evolution of his views:

Being newspapermen in the American liberal tradition, the way we interpret the news is...by proposing theories and hypotheses which are then tested by trial and error. We put forth the most plausible interpretation we can think of...and then we wait to see whether the later news fits into the interpretation. We do well if with only a little amendment...the later news fits into it...if the later news knocks down the earlier story, there are two things to be done. One is to scrap the theory and interpretation, which is what liberal, honest men do.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Walter Lippmann, “October 1959: Birthday Address to the National Press Club,” reprinted in *Nieman Reports* 53/54, no. 4/1 (Winter 1999-Spring 2000): 25-26.

PART II
**THE EVOLUTION OF WALTER LIPPMAN'S VIEWS ON THE PRESS AND PUBLIC
OPINION**

We grow into a new point of view; only afterwards, in
looking back, do we see the landmarks of our progress.

– Walter Lippmann, *A Preface to Politics*

Due to the enduring appeal of his classic work, Walter Lippmann continues to be closely identified with contemporary notions of the relationship between the press and public opinion. Although it remains his most thorough elaboration on the topic, *Public Opinion* was neither Lippmann's first attempt to evaluate this dynamic, nor his decisive verdict on the subject. A comprehensive survey of his books, articles and correspondence reveals how his theories on the press and public opinion changed, sometimes subtly, other times dramatically, over the course of six decades. Published early in his career, *Public Opinion* signals just one – admittedly pivotal – point in that evolution.

In mapping his views, I identified five distinct periods that informed Lippmann's writing on the press and public opinion; each period represents a stage in the evolution of his thinking. During every stage, he contemplated the relationship between the press and public opinion. During every stage, his level of concern regarding the performance of the press and the competence of the public reflected his comfort with the state of public affairs. The distinguishing factor in each period was the degree of confidence he expressed in the ability of both the press and the public to fulfill its role in our democracy.

The five stages in the evolution of Lippmann's views on the press and public opinion are examined in this section. Throughout the first period, from 1908-1918, Lippmann was idealistic, and his views, which he was still refining, were inconsistent. In

the lead up to the United States' entry into World War I, he romanticized the roles of public opinion and the press in strengthening democracy. In the next period, 1919-1921, alarmed by his wartime experiences, Lippmann was critical of the press and concerned about protecting the sources of public opinion. He proposed reforms for both, suggesting he remained optimistic that each could still achieve the democratic ideal. Lippmann wrote his most popular book, *Public Opinion*, during the third period, 1922-1924. His view at that time was neither the public nor the press could properly fulfill its duty in an increasingly complex world. By the fourth period, 1925-1951, Lippmann's views on public opinion had grown undeniably negative. He now argued that the public was qualified only to make yes or no decisions. He thought the press did its best to help citizens navigate their environment. Lippmann's most negative views on public opinion are found in *Essays in the Public Philosophy*, published during the final period examined in this section, 1952-1971. Lippmann felt catering to public opinion enfeebled the executive branch; critical policy decisions, which he argued should be handled by knowledgeable experts, were instead shaped by the whims of popular sentiment. He heralded the press, however, as "essential" to democracy.

Even as his views evolved from period to period, Lippmann's assessment of the state of the press and public opinion returned to the same set of issues: competence; power; the roles of elites, experts, and government leaders; and the consequences for democracy. Tracking his evaluation of these issues over the years adds context to his changing views. Lippmann was both a product of and a participant in events; his experiences shaped his views. This section begins with Lippmann's most hopeful period, which coincided with the optimistic, reform-minded progressive era.

PART II; CHAPTER ONE 1908-1918

“Idealism” creates an abstraction and then shudders at a reality which does not answer to it.
– Walter Lippmann, *A Preface to Politics*

This chapter looks at Lippmann’s writings on the press and public opinion from 1908 to 1918, a period when he adapted the views of others as he refined his own theories. While he voiced concerns about the performance of the press and doubts about the formation of public opinion, his views were tempered with the confident optimism of youth. The period follows Lippmann from his final years at Harvard to the end of World War I, when he worked at the War Department, served on the Inquiry, and wrote propaganda in support of the Allies. During this time period, Lippmann wrote three books and helped launch the *New Republic*. The defining theme, from our 100-year vantage point, is the contradictions in his thinking as he puzzled with issues that went to the heart of democracy, issues that would become the focus of much of his life’s work.

Public Opinion may be his career-defining book, but Lippmann once struggled to define the term. In 1915, as a young *New Republic* editor, he discussed opinion formation in an interview with a newspaper reporter.¹ The focus of the interview was well defined: Lippmann was asked simply, “What is opinion?” His answer, in contrast, was quite convoluted: “We understand it here in this office...as belief for which one is not quite ready to be burnt at the stake. Humility is necessarily a part of the process of arriving at it.”²

¹ The reporter chose the *New Republic* because it billed itself as “a journal of opinion.” It was not specified why Lippmann was the editor selected for the interview.

² E.S. Evans, “American Opinion is in a Pretty State: Provincialism and Prejudice in Their Making, says Walter Lippmann, Mark the Opinions We Hold so Desperately,” *New York Tribune*, July 25, 1915.

The reporter, unsatisfied, repeated the question and Lippmann flailed about in a second attempt, more tortured than his first:

It is a crystallized something, yet always changing — the human fashion of trying answers to problems not by looking on high, but by looking around. No, no, not dogma — that you know...(it) is a sort of sanctified intuition conforming pretty much to individual indigestion...what you have is something you've got either from having it handed to you or out of your own prejudices. It is an object of life to have opinions and know why you have them.³

In light of Lippmann's verbose response, it is possible the reporter was mocking him when he referred to Lippmann as "the Analyst of Opinion." What is evident is that Lippmann had been thinking about the role of public opinion, even if he could not fully articulate his thoughts on the subject. That would come in time.

Lippmann's views on public opinion during this period

"Their specific plans may be silly, but their demands are real."⁴

Lippmann's first love was politics, but it was his desire to influence public opinion that led him to pursue a career in journalism. "I have a more or less professional interest in public affairs," Lippmann wrote in 1913. "I have had opportunity to look at politics from the point of view of the man who is trying to get the attention of people in order to carry through some reform."⁵ He began writing for campus publications – and attracting attention for his work – while an undergraduate at Harvard.⁶ Lippmann found

³ Evans, "American Opinion is in a Pretty State."

⁴ Walter Lippmann, *A Preface to Politics* (1913; repr., Lexington: 2014), 31.

⁵ *A Preface to Politics*, 3.

⁶ Walter Schloss to Lippmann, 1909, praising "Harvard In Politics": "It is one of the best I have read in a college publication. If your journalistic work in the outside world is up to this standard there will be no doubt as to your ultimate success in this line." WLP.

his voice in the socialist movement, apiece with progressive theory at the time.⁷ His earliest works addressed the challenges facing democracy in the modern age and conveyed his discontent with the status quo in politics. He was adamant that the abundant promise of the new century demanded a fresh approach to politics, one that harnessed public opinion in pursuit of that potential. “The old individualism, with its anarchistic *laissez-faire*,” Lippmann wrote, must surrender the reins to a modern, “constructive statesmanship, imbued with a social conscience, and acting through the collective will of the nation.”⁸ More than a decade before he wrote *Public Opinion*, Lippmann was already evaluating the role public opinion played in public affairs.

Although Lippmann recognized that public opinion was often shaped by passions and uneducated views, he believed it had value.⁹ Without specifically calling it public opinion, in writing about the collective will, Lippmann signaled the importance he placed on a politically engaged public. In *A Preface to Politics* (1913) and *Drift and Mastery* (1914), he advocated for a human-centered approach to government, one that attempted to satisfy, rather than to thwart, human desire. Lippmann’s thesis, modeled on political theorist Graham Wallas’ idea of “the Great Society,” insisted government should facilitate both needs and wants; it must be responsive to public opinion.¹⁰ “It is not the business of the politician to preserve an Olympian indifference to what the stupid people call ‘popular whim,’” he wrote. “Being lofty about the ‘passing fad’ and the ephemeral

⁷ Lee Simonson to Lippmann, March 1908, WLP. The letter opens with the salutation “Dear Deputy to the Socialist Celebrities.”

⁸ Walter Lippmann, “Socialism at Harvard,” *Harvard Illustrated*, March 1909, 139.

⁹ “‘Enlightened public opinion’... is largely determined by the real impulses of men.” *A Preface to Politics*, 46.

¹⁰ “For the easy expression of public opinion in government is a clue to what services are needed and a test of their success. It keeps the processes of politics well-ventilated and reminds politicians of their excuse for existence.” *A Preface to Politics*, 90.

outrage is all very well in the biographies of dead men, but rank nonsense in the rulers of real ones.”¹¹ Lippmann recognized that public opinion was not an entirely rational phenomenon; it was shaped by desires as much as practical concerns. He defended passion as a legitimate component of public opinion.¹² “Ignore what a man desires and you ignore the very source of his power,” Lippmann warned, “run against the grain of a nation’s genius and see where you get with your laws.”¹³

Although he believed in the power of public opinion, at the same time he mistrusted it, perhaps even feared it slightly, a harbinger of his coming views. “The public is capable of oppression,” Lippmann wrote. “There will be a tyranny of the majority for which minorities will have to prepare.”¹⁴ The gulf between his theoretical ideals and concrete reality led to contradictions in his writing; his desire to reform democratic processes and his elitist concerns about the people who would engage in those processes were constantly at war during this period. Lippmann’s enthusiasm for public opinion belied his disdain for the actual public, that “great dulling mass” he considered largely ignorant or indifferent, and all too easily bewildered.¹⁵ Lippmann maintained government should be responsive to public opinion, yet considered most public sentiment ill-informed. Even as he advocated for a human-centered politics, Lippmann warned of

¹¹ *A Preface to Politics*, 31.

¹² “Men desire first, then they reason.” *A Preface to Politics*, 66.

¹³ *A Preface to Politics*, 70.

¹⁴ *Drift and Mastery*, 55.

¹⁵ Lippmann readily noticed contradictions in others. When he wrote “‘Idealism’ creates an abstraction and then shudders at a reality,” he was referring to statesmen rather than himself. *A Preface to Politics*, 15.

placing too much faith in humans.¹⁶ “The one thing that no democrat may assume,” he wrote, “is that the people are dear good souls, fully competent for their task.”¹⁷ Passion he would defend; ignorance he could not tolerate.

Still, Lippmann vacillated between the rationality of the public and the validity of public opinion, revealing the tension between his reform-minded progressivism and his innate elitism. Regardless of its inherent flaws, Lippmann argued that public opinion merited attention. “Democracy, because it registers popular feeling, is...an enlightened form of government,” he wrote. “So we who are democrats need not believe that people are necessarily right in their choice: some of us are always in the minority, and not a little proud of the distinction.”¹⁸ So while Lippmann wrote that voting conveyed consent of the governed, he rejected the idea it necessarily revealed a form of mass insight.¹⁹ “Its real value,” he argued, “is to furnish wisdom about multitudes.”²⁰ Despite his embrace of public opinion as a gauge of government performance, he deemed entire segments of the population unfit to participate in democracy. “You can’t build a modern nation out of Georgia crackers, poverty-stricken negroes, the homeless and helpless of the great cities,” he wrote. “They make a governing class essential.”²¹ In time, he would expand this idea to include the population at large. He will build his case in favor of insiders versus outsiders. Lippmann’s elitism ultimately will prevail.

¹⁶ “Governments have to be carried on by men, however much we distrust them.” *A Preface to Politics*, 9.

¹⁷ *A Preface to Politics*, 90 – 91.

¹⁸ It is evident in his writing that Lippmann saw a clear distinction between himself (and his highly educated cohorts) and “the public.” *A Preface to Politics*, 37.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Drift and Mastery*, 141.

Lippmann ascended to insider status almost from the launch of his career.²² This was a case when his views moved beyond the theoretical into the practical. As a journalist and author, Lippmann aspired to educate elites as well as shape public opinion. After attracting considerable attention with his first book, Lippmann accepted Herbert Croly's offer to join the *New Republic* as a founding editor. The publication targeted an elite audience, "that select stratum of intellectual talent from which experts might derive."²³ According to Lippmann, the weekly magazine was conceived as a means to promote the Progressive platform.²⁴ "We started, in other words, on the assumption that we were enlisted as loyal, though we hoped critical, members of the Progressive movement," he wrote. "We thought the movement was established. We thought that Roosevelt would continue to lead it."²⁵ When it became clear Theodore Roosevelt could not win the 1916 election, and after much lobbying of his fellow editors by Lippmann, the *New Republic* belatedly threw its support behind President Woodrow Wilson's re-election.²⁶ Before long, the editors of the *New Republic* were meeting regularly with

²² Lippmann "made his way almost effortlessly into the highest levels of society and politics, his uninterrupted elevation almost proof in itself of the progressive view of history." Sidney Blumenthal, afterword to *Liberty and the News*, by Walter Lippmann (1920; repr., Chicago: BN Publishing, 2007), 63.

²³ Kaplan, 355-356. The magazine's mission, according to Croly, was "to do something towards brightening the coinage of American opinion, sharpening the edges of its design." Herbert Croly, "The New Republic Idea," *New Republic*, December 6, 1922, 3.

²⁴ Croly recruited Lippmann to join the *New Republic* in November 1913; the first issue was published two months after the start of World War I. (Lippmann continued writing for Socialist publications throughout much of 1914. In June 1914, he was listed as a member of the *New Review* advisory board. His name had been removed from the list by the following issue.) The leading editors' note for the inaugural issue advised readers that the new magazine was "frankly an experiment...and attempt to find (a) national audience for a journal of interpretation and opinion." *New Republic* 1, no. 1, November 7, 1914.

²⁵ Walter Lippmann, "Notes for a Biography," *New Republic*, July 16, 1930, 250.

²⁶ Steel, 106.

members of the Wilson administration, much as they had previously met regularly with Roosevelt.²⁷

Regarding their connections at the White House, Lippmann insisted that, following a quarrel with Roosevelt, the editors of the *New Republic* “never had any close personal association with any public man.”²⁸ He and Croly were, however, in close touch with Wilson advisor Colonel Edward House, and Lippmann frequently corresponded and met with Secretary of War Newton Baker, often making policy suggestions and asking Baker to pass along information to Wilson, or writing directly to the President himself. (He would leave the *New Republic* to briefly join Baker’s staff at the War Department in 1917, before being recruited to serve on the Inquiry, where he drafted the majority of President Wilson’s Fourteen Points). Yet, according to Lippmann, if the President regularly adopted policies endorsed by the magazine, it was, as he once wrote to Wilson appointee George Rublee, “a happy journalistic coincidence.”²⁹ Lippmann maintained the editors were never privy to inside information. “We never knew anything that hadn’t appeared in the newspapers,” he wrote.³⁰ This, of course, was not true. Despite Lippmann’s repeated disavowals, his private correspondence reveals he actively sought opportunities to assist and influence members of the Wilson administration.³¹

²⁷ Lippmann wrote the labor plank for Roosevelt’s Bull Moose Party platform. Steel, 65.

²⁸ Lippmann, “Notes for a Biography,” 251.

²⁹ Lippmann to George Rublee, August 26, 1916, congratulating Rublee on Wilson’s decision to renominate him to the Federal Trade Commission. WLP.

³⁰ Lippmann, “Notes for a Biography,” 252.

³¹ “The things you are most closely in touch with are the very things we are most likely to need help in understanding and interpreting.” Lippmann to Baker, April 21, 1916. Baker replied, “I will always be glad to see you. There are several sub-surface things about which I am anxious to have your advice.” Newton Baker to Lippmann, April 22, 1916, WLP.

When, in January 1917, President Wilson lifted the phrase “peace without victory” from the title of a December 1916 Lippmann editorial and used it in an address to the Senate, it was hard to dismiss as a coincidence, and Lippmann claimed the *New Republic* editors were “horrified” rather than happy.³² In any case, the incident enhanced the impression of a close relationship between the White House and the magazine. Other journalists continued to assume the magazine was, if not an organ of, a strategic partner to the Wilson administration: “To us the morning’s news means only a sort of editorial paralysis; we can only wait and wait, and refrain from new undertakings till we know what’s to happen; but of course the New Republic must go on advising and commenting.”³³ The assumption raised the profiles of both the magazine and Lippmann.³⁴ C.P. Scott, publisher of the *Manchester Guardian*, recruited him to cable updates on the war from America, noting that readers in England would undoubtedly be interested in Lippmann’s views. “It is, I think, quite recognized here that you are in intimate communication with the President,” Scott wrote.³⁵

Not only would Lippmann enjoy some form of communication with every U.S. president from Theodore Roosevelt to Lyndon Johnson (wielding more influence in some administrations than others), he also engaged in correspondence with secretaries of State, military commanders, senators and congressmen.³⁸ As his readership grew, so did his

³² Lippmann, “Notes for a Biography,” 252. Wilson used the phrase to promote his peace plan, a wholly different context than Lippmann, who was against the idea of a negotiated peace. Walter Lippmann, “Peace Without Victory,” *New Republic*, December 23, 1916.

³³ Frederick L. Allen to Lippmann, Feb. 1, 1917. WLP.

³⁴ As Lippmann related: “once to our intense surprise the stock market reacted when an issue of *The New Republic* appeared on the newsstands.” “Notes for a Biography,” 252.

³⁵ C.P. Scott to Lippmann, March 21, 1917, WLP.

³⁸ Former President Teddy Roosevelt wrote to Lippmann expressing his pleasure with *A Preface to Politics*: “With your main thesis I am in hearty agreement... I also much

ability to leverage his platform to gain inside information from government officials and other elites.³⁹ Prior to joining the *New Republic*, Lippmann regarded the press as operating on the periphery of public affairs; now, as a journalist, he helped shape the very policies he was writing about. He referred to people who relied solely on the press for knowledge, those who were “limited to gazing at the facade of public life,” as “outsiders.” This condition put such men at a disadvantage. “Insiders,” those elite men who had direct knowledge of public affairs, “read the newspapers and then telephone to find out what really happened.”⁴⁰ It was between these two groups that “the cleavage of opinion” most often occurred.⁴¹ The disparities between insiders and outsiders would be a recurring theme in Lippmann’s views on public opinion. During this period, he thought the press might bridge the divide between the two, primarily by insiders making better use of publicity so as to convince outsiders of the rightness of their arguments.⁴² In addition to its watchdog duties, Lippmann saw the press as a conduit for elites to make their case to the public.⁴³ “Nothing,” he wrote, “would be more disheartening than to do a good job and have nobody know about it.”⁴⁴

appreciate your tone toward me.” Roosevelt to Lippmann, December 12, 1913, WLP. Roosevelt reviewed Lippmann’s next book, *Drift and Mastery*, along with Herbert Croly’s *Progressive Democracy*, writing: “No man who wishes seriously to study our present social, industrial, and political life...can afford not to read these books through and through and to ponder and digest them.” Theodore Roosevelt, “Two Noteworthy Books on Democracy,” *Outlook*, Nov. 18, 1914, 648.

³⁹ David Weingast considered columnists like Lippmann “practitioners of personal journalism,” opinion makers who use their platform to practice a “distinctly individual interpretation of the news.” Weingast, 297.

⁴⁰ Walter Lippmann, “Insiders and Outsiders,” *New Republic*, November 13, 1915, 35.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Lippmann, “Insiders and Outsiders,” 36.

⁴³ Walter Lippmann, “A National Diagnosis,” *Everybody’s*, Feb 1913, 248.

⁴⁴ Walter Lippmann, “The Greatest Question,” *Everybody’s*, April 1911.

Lippmann's views on the press during this period

“To govern a democracy you have to educate it.”⁴⁵

Lippmann's views on the press during this period, much like his views on public opinion, were unfixed. At times, he felt the news reflected public opinion; at others, that the press censored itself out of deference to its audience; and at others still, that public opinion distorted the news.⁴⁸ For example, Lippmann attributed the muckrakers' initial popularity to a genuine dissatisfaction among their audience. “If business and politics really served American need,” he explained, “you could never induce people to believe so many accusations against them.”⁴⁹ In this way, he thought the press mirrored public opinion. He also wrote, rather contradictorily, just a few pages later that the muckrakers went too far: “But the fact that a public official took no bribe soon ceased to shield him from popular attack...he wasn't for what public opinion had come to expect, and the muckrakers laid their traps for him.”⁵⁰ Yet it was during his year with the muckrakers at *Everybody's* magazine that Lippmann experienced firsthand how outside pressures influenced news content. It was not, however, the usual suspects lordling power over the publication that most alarmed him – it was the way editors shrank before public opinion:

I have worked in the editorial office of a popular magazine, a magazine that is known widely as a champion of popular rights. By personal experience, by intimate conversations, and by looking about, I think I am pretty well aware of what the influence of business upon journalism amounts to. I have seen the inside working of business pressure; articles of my own have been suppressed after they were in type; friends of mine have told me stories of expurgation, of the “morganization” of their

⁴⁵ *A Preface to Politics*, 37.

⁴⁸ *A Preface to Politics*, 30.

⁴⁹ *Drift and Mastery*, 24.

⁵⁰ *Drift and Mastery*, 27. Ultimately, Lippmann felt muckraking exhausted itself in the relentless pursuit of corruption: launching indiscriminate attacks on easy targets was a misreading of the public's appetite. “The search for not-dishonest men ceased to be interesting.”

editorial policy. And in the face of that I should like to record it as my sincere conviction that no financial power is one-tenth so corrupting, so insidious, so hostile to originality and frank statement as the fear of the public which reads the magazine. For one item suppressed out of respect for a railroad or a bank, nine are rejected because of the prejudices of the public. This will anger the farmers, that will arouse the Catholics... Anybody can take a fling at poor old Mr. Rockefeller, but the great mass of average citizens (to which none of us belongs) must be left in undisturbed possession of its prejudices.⁵¹

This editorial self-censorship, Lippmann complained, was “the reason why American journalism is so flaccid, so repetitious and so dull.”⁵² He questioned the press as a source of reliable facts, and considered its lackluster performance a disservice to the public that relied on it for information. “Pick up your newspaper,” Lippmann wrote, “run over in your mind the ‘issues’ of a campaign, and then ask yourself whether the average man is entirely to blame because he smiles a bit at Armageddon and refuses to take the politician at his rhetorical valuation?”⁵³ While the preceding quote appears to be a light-hearted jab at the press, in more serious musings Lippmann warned that this lack of knowledge undermined democracy. “Those portions of America where there are voting booths but no schools cannot possibly be described as democracies,” he wrote. “Nor can the person who reads one corrupt newspaper and then goes out to vote make any claim to having registered his will. He may have a will, but he has not used it.”⁵⁴

⁵¹ *A Preface to Politics*, 60-61.

⁵² *A Preface to Politics*, 61.

⁵³ *A Preface to Politics*, 3.

⁵⁴ *A Preface to Politics*, 91.

The problem Lippmann identified was two-fold: The press made poor choices regarding news content and the public lacked the critical skills to discern whether news was accurate and, just as importantly, relevant.⁵⁵ Lippmann worried that the public, who took the newspaper to stay informed on current affairs, was being misled. Newspaper readers, he wrote, were “torn and twisted by the irrelevant, in frenzy about issues that do not concern us, bored with those that do.”⁵⁶ At this point in time, Lippmann did not consider the situation hopeless. Nor did he consider himself a part of the problem, even though a few examples of criticism could be pointed at him. The issue, as he saw it, was not that the press could not do a good job but rather that it would not. Editors were unwilling to risk alienating their audiences.

Lippmann had an abiding interest in foreign affairs and addressed how news coverage of such issues shaped public opinion. “It is small wonder that newspapers are, in the main, instruments of irritation between peoples,” he wrote. “In almost every crisis the tension is increased by the newspapers.”⁵⁷ Lippmann faulted editors who relinquished their decision-making function to public opinion, while making allowances for the pressures they faced. News on international affairs, which almost always revolved around conflict, aroused the emotions of a community; the editor, of course, was part of the community, too. Taking a “strong” stand on the front page was the safest approach,

⁵⁵ Editorial cartoons featuring Wall Street financiers were mistaken for legitimate portraits that “no end of fairly sane people believe.” *Drift and Mastery*, 24.

⁵⁶ *Drift and Mastery*, 118-119.

⁵⁷ Walter Lippmann, “Some Notes on the Press,” excerpt from *The Stakes of Diplomacy*, in Rossiter and Lare, 398.

Lippmann suggested, “for it flatters everybody.” In attempting a more balanced, nuanced approach — what he referred to as the “weak” stand — editors risked coming off as “academic, mugwumpish, unmanly.”⁵⁸ The key to balance, he explained, was in making “appeals to thought which is pale rather than to lusts which are strong.”⁵⁹ Lippmann acknowledged it was difficult for an editor to go against the prevailing public mood; he did not feel such decisions were made with malicious intent. “He does it with a good conscience, for the human conscience is never so much at ease as when it follows the line of least resistance,” Lippmann wrote. “Only saints, heroes, and specialists in virtue feel remorse because they have done what everybody was doing and agreed with what everybody was thinking.”⁶⁰

During World War I, Lippmann was troubled by government attempts at censorship and suppression of news. When the United States Post Office refused to forward socialist newspapers it deemed “seditious,” he expressed his concerns to Colonel House, while allowing that some degree of censorship during a time of war was inevitable. “I have no doctrinaire belief in free speech,” Lippmann wrote. “In the interest of war it is necessary to sacrifice some of it.”⁶¹ He worried that censorship would stir up more agitation than a radical paper possibly could. As he wrote in 1913, “We deprive anarchists of free speech by the heavy hand of a police magistrate, and furnish them with

⁵⁸ Lippmann, “Some Notes on the Press,” 399.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Lippmann to Colonel House, October 17, 1917. Lippmann initially discussed his concerns with House in person, who then asked him to put his views in a letter so House could share it with President Wilson. Diary entry, October 17, 1917, reel 160, WLP.

a practical instead of a theoretical argument against government.”⁶² Although he was a journalist, over the years Lippmann would concede there were circumstances where the First Amendment could – as well as others where he felt it should – be circumscribed. During the war, Lippmann’s primary argument against press suppression was that it negatively affected public opinion.

Throughout this period, Lippmann was refining his views about the role of the press and public opinion. He felt each served important functions in democracy, although he was still calibrating the proper balance required for the relationship to flourish. He was optimistic that equilibrium could be achieved. In Lippmann’s view, uneducated and indifferent voters – those Georgia crackers and poverty-stricken Negroes he so readily dismissed – posed the greatest obstacle to a workable democracy. “The great reactionary forces in the world to-day are not the professed reactionaries,” he wrote, “but the great dulling mass of people who don’t care.”⁶³ The public’s ignorance and apathy were both symptom of an inadequate press and cause of an ill-judged public opinion.

Despite his reservations about the public and his lack of confidence in the press, his early writings reflect a generally positive outlook; he did not consider the challenges he identified insurmountable. Like many progressives of that era, he championed the scientific method and endorsed education reform to address the deficiencies in the public’s knowledge of public affairs. Lippmann believed fact and reason would lead public opinion toward wise conclusions. Progressives like Herbert Croly and Walter Weyl, Lippmann’s future co-editors at the *New Republic*, and Randolph Bourne and John Dewey, who would also write for the magazine, had been advocating for experts, the

⁶² *A Preface to Politics*, 15.

⁶³ Walter Lippmann, “In Defence of the Suffragettes,” *Harvard Monthly*, Nov. 1909, 64.

scientific method, a human-focused politics, and the inevitability of progress prior to Lippmann's own endorsement of those ideals.⁶⁴ In their books, these men, like Lippmann, laid out visions of a "mystically perfected democracy."⁶⁵ Dewey, Bourne and Croly built their visions on "a strong faith in magnetic intellects as pilots of social change."⁶⁶ So did Lippmann. The antidote to what Lippmann considered the public's appalling lack of knowledge, the partisan motives of the press, and the shallow platitudes of politics was a steady stream of reliable facts. "No matter what the remedy is," he wrote, "the facts must come first; whatever the theory you deduce, the only solid foundation is the facts; the way to begin is to find out."⁶⁷ Lippmann had faith the press could facilitate this ideal, and in the next period, he would call upon it to help protect the sources of public opinion from corruption, and, perhaps, save democracy from itself.

In these early writings, Lippmann sowed the seeds of ideas that will mature in *Public Opinion* and in his later works. During this period he was neither as sure nor as focused as he would be in the coming years when his theories are more fully realized. He will raise these issues more forcefully in the next period.

⁶⁴ Croly was the first of the group to address these issues; his book, *The Promise of American Life*, was published in 1909, three years before Weyl's *The New Democracy*. Croly's second book, *Progressive Democracy*, was published the same year as Lippmann's *Drift and Mastery*. Felix Frankfurter said Croly's first book "became the reservoir for all political writing" that came after it. Felix Frankfurter, "Herbert Croly and American Political Opinion," *New Republic*, July 16, 1930, 247. Eulau called Croly "the intellectual godfather of Woodrow Wilson's 'New Freedom' and Franklin Roosevelt's 'New Deal.'" Heinz Eulau, "Herbert Croly's Promise," *Antioch Review* 8, no. 3 (Autumn 1948): 382. Lippmann considered Croly "the first important political philosopher who appeared in America in the twentieth century." Lippmann, "Notes for a Biography," 250.

⁶⁵ David W. Noble, "The New Republic and the Idea of Progress, 1914-1920," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 38, no. 3 (Dec. 1951): 389.

⁶⁶ Kaplan, 351.

⁶⁷ Lippmann, "A National Diagnosis," 248.

PART II; CHAPTER TWO

1919-1921

The present crisis of western democracy is a crisis in journalism.

– Walter Lippmann, *Liberty and the News*

This chapter covers the years 1919 to 1921, a relatively brief yet significant period in the evolution of Walter Lippmann's views on the press and public opinion. As the optimistic national mood of the progressive era receded in the years following the end of World War I, Lippmann's voice, so hopeful in his first two books, assumed an urgent tone as he revisited his earlier views.¹ Lippmann's wartime experience disabused him of many of his idealistic notions, not least the possibility of an unadulterated public opinion successfully navigating a marketplace of ideas flooded with publicity and propaganda.² What Lippmann lacked of his pre-war optimism was offset by his confidence and passion. He remained convinced an enlightened public opinion was possible and, despite his harsh assessment of the press, still believed American journalism could be redeemed. Lippmann detailed his theories to rehabilitate both in his book *Liberty and the News*.³

¹ "War had wrecked the domestic reform movement;" progressivism was replaced by

² "Journalists, like others, lost faith in verities a democratic market society had taken for granted. Their experience of propaganda during the war and public relations thereafter convinced them that the world they reported was one that interested parties had constructed for them to report." Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (Basic Books, Inc., 1978), 6.

³ Two of the three essays in *Liberty and the News* were first published in the *Atlantic Monthly*. In a letter to *Atlantic* editor Ellery Sedgwick, Lippmann revealed his strategy and his intended audience. "I think the articles are arranged in such a way as to catch the attention of newspaper men who may not be interested in the more philosophical arguments addressed to students of politics. I am not at all pleased with the titles." Lippmann to Ellery Sedgwick, June 30, 1919, WLP.

With his *New Republic* colleague Charles Merz, he undertook a pioneering content analysis of the *New York Times*' coverage of the Russian Revolution.⁴ During this period, Lippmann resumed his position at the *New Republic* and served as the first American foreign correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian*.⁵

In the wake of World War I, Lippmann viewed the relationship between the press, public opinion and government from a new perspective. Before the war, he thought an uninformed public diminished the promise of democracy; he now felt a *misinformed* public threatened the entire foundation:

It is clear that in a society where public opinion has become decisive, nothing that counts in the formation of it can really be a matter of indifference. When I say "can be," I am speaking literally. What men...believe about property, government, conscription, taxation, the origins of the late war...constitutes the difference between life and death, prosperity and misfortune, and it will never on this earth be tolerated as indifferent.⁶

Lippmann started his career as an idealist.⁷ He volunteered for the war effort because he wanted to be of service, to help make the world "safe for democracy"⁸ (and, if he garnered a little acclaim in the process, that was fine, too). Lippmann supported President Wilson's war aims, framing the fight to spread democracy as a noble endeavor.⁹ Instead, the United States' involvement in World War I led to a curtailing of our citizens'

⁴ Lippmann and Merz developed rigorous criteria to ensure the objectivity of their analysis; Lippmann, long a proponent of the scientific method, put his ideal into practice with laudatory results. "The reliability of the news may be tested by a few fundamental and decisive happenings about which there is no doubt." Walter Lippmann and Charles Merz, "More News from the Times," *New Republic*, August 11, 1920, 301.

⁵ From March 1919 to June 1920, he wrote about 85 articles for the *Manchester Guardian*.

⁶ Walter Lippmann, *Liberty and the News* (1920; repr., BN Publishing, 2007), 21.

⁷ See Noble, "The New Republic and the Idea of Progress;" and Heinz Eulau, "Wilsonian Idealist: Walter Lippmann Goes to War," *Antioch Review* 14, no. 1 (Spring, 1954).

⁸ From President Wilson's war declaration, April 2, 1917.

⁹ "We are fighting for democracy...for the democratic rights of other nations." Walter Lippmann, "Losing Our First Trenches," *New Republic*, July 14, 1917, 292.

basic rights. Upon his return from Europe, Lippmann found it necessary to mount a defense of democratic principles at home.¹⁰ His war experiences seemed to reinvigorate his crusading nature. “It is forever incredible,” Lippmann wrote to Newton Baker, “that an administration announcing the most spacious ideals in our history should have done more to endanger fundamental American liberties than any group of men for a hundred years.”¹¹

Lippmann’s views on public opinion during this period

“A sound public opinion cannot exist without access to the news.”¹²

In the essays, articles and books he wrote during this period, Lippmann warned that without a legitimate public opinion “democracy will degenerate.”¹³ To avoid this fate, he insisted public opinion must be grounded in truths rather than patriotic slogans or political platitudes.¹⁴ He rejected passion as an appropriate source of opinion in favor of rationality. Whereas he once wrote off whole segments of the population as unfit to participate in democracy, he now maintained that the public was capable of reaching reasoned conclusions when provided with accurate information. “To deny this, it seems to me, is to claim that the mass of men is impervious to education,” Lippmann wrote, “and to deny that, is to deny the postulate of democracy.”¹⁵ This pronouncement contradicted his earlier position about the necessity of a governing class and hinged on the question of whether the facts were readily available.

¹⁰ “We have learned that many of the hard won rights of man are utterly insecure.” *Liberty and the News*, 12.

¹¹ Lippmann to Newton Baker, January 7, 1920, WLP.

¹² Walter Lippmann and Charles Merz, “A Test of the News,” *New Republic*, August 4, 1920, 1.

¹³ *Liberty and the News*, 59.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Liberty and the News*, 58.

Lippmann's views during this period reflect his disillusionment upon "the discovery that opinion can be manufactured."¹⁶ He had been troubled by wartime restrictions on free speech and began work on the essays that would become *Liberty and the News* (1920) soon after he returned to America.¹⁷ The book reads as an exercise in reconciling his earlier idealistic views on the press and public opinion with the realities of his war experience. Lippmann first broached the idea of pursuing the topic with Ellery Sedgwick, the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, in April 1919.¹⁸ "The idea has come to me gradually as a result of certain experiences with the official propaganda machine," he wrote to Sedgwick, "and my hope is to attempt a restatement of the problem of freedom of thought as it presents itself in modern society under modern conditions of government and with a modern knowledge of how to manipulate the human mind."¹⁹

Lippmann's primary concern during this period was protecting the sources of public opinion. "Everything else," he wrote, "depends upon it."²⁰ Assuming as Lippmann did "a public opinion that governs," his realization that news was often manipulated and consent routinely manufactured suggested grave consequences for democracy.²¹ "Without protection against propaganda, without standards of evidence, without criteria of emphasis," he wrote, "the living substance of all popular decision is exposed to every

¹⁶ Lippmann to Ellery Sedgwick, editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, April 7, 1919, WLP.

¹⁷ The original title for the book, according to a contract between Lippmann and Harcourt, Brace and Howe dated November 14, 1919, was *The Sources of Public Opinion, Democracy and the News*. WLP, reel 12.

¹⁸ "I have started to write a longish article around the general idea that freedom of thought and speech present themselves in a new light and raise new problems because of the discovery that opinion can be manufactured." Lippmann to Sedgwick, April 7, 1919.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Liberty and the News*, 37.

²¹ *Liberty and the News*, 37.

prejudice and to infinite exploitation.”²² He understood a misinformed public was vulnerable to propaganda and distortions. “The quack, the charlatan, the jingo, and the terrorist,” he warned, “can flourish only where the audience is deprived of independent access to information.”²³ Lippmann had little confidence in the old clichés about truth prevailing over lies; he considered untrue opinions potentially dangerous, and “just as effective as true ones, if not a little more effective.”²⁴

A recurring theme in Lippmann’s writing over the years was that the world had grown too complex for most men to fully contemplate.²⁵ The problem, as he identified it during this period, was that the public realized the issues were challenging, but they did not have access to the information required to reach informed opinions. “Increasingly they are baffled because the facts are not available,” Lippmann wrote, “and they are wondering whether government by consent can survive in a time when the manufacture of consent is an unregulated private enterprise.”²⁶ Prior to the war, he attributed the dismal state of public opinion to the public’s indifference toward public affairs. Now, however, Lippmann’s writing assumed a civically engaged public much interested in the news of the day. “What he knows of events that matter enormously to him, the purposes of governments, the aspirations of peoples, the struggles of classes, he knows as second, third, or fourth hand,” Lippmann wrote. “He cannot go see for himself. Even the things

²² *Liberty and the News*, 37.

²³ *Liberty and the News*, 32.

²⁴ *Liberty and the News*, 42. The skeptical Lippmann fell more into the “you can fool most of the people most of the time” camp.

²⁵ “The world about which each man is supposed to have opinions has become so complicated as to defy his powers of understanding.” *Liberty and the News*, 22.

²⁶ *Liberty and the News*, 2.

that are near to him have become too involved for his judgment.”²⁷ Lippmann’s concern was that this second-hand news was more than likely subjective.²⁸ He was adamant that a well-formed public opinion depended upon access to unbiased news.²⁹ Reason required objectivity.³⁰

Lippmann witnessed first hand the ill effects of second-hand news during World War I, when distance amplified the usual distortions, and, aided by the censors, primed conditions for the spread of rumor and propaganda. Although he argued in *Liberty and the News* that the First Amendment was the basis of all liberty, his dire assessment that uninformed beliefs would ultimately result in disaster led Lippmann to endorse a circumscribed freedom of expression. In an article that appeared in the *New Republic* the same month his first essay from *Liberty and the News* was published in the *Atlantic*, Lippmann seemed to argue that true liberty meant ensuring the right to free expression applied equally to popular and unpopular beliefs, with no qualification that the belief be based on fact.³¹ “That means protecting some pretty poor opinions,” Lippmann explained, “ignorant, wild and mean opinions, occasionally even sinister ones.”³² He went on to suggest that pride of opinion – a belief that one held a monopoly on the truth – was “the worst form of pride.”³³ It would have to be surrendered if the nation was to recover from

²⁷ *Liberty and the News*, 22.

²⁸ “But where all news comes at second-hand, where all testimony is uncertain, men cease to respond to truths, and respond simply to opinions.” *Liberty and the News*, 32-33.

²⁹ *Liberty and the News*, 58.

³⁰ *Liberty and the News*, 34.

³¹ “For the very essence of any sincere belief in the liberty promised by the First Amendment is a willingness to defend the liberty of opinions with which you disagree.” Walter Lippmann, “Unrest,” *New Republic*, November 12, 1919, 317.

³² Lippmann, “Unrest,” 317. The article seems aimed at specific critics in defense of some specific opinions, rather than simply promoting tolerance at large.

³³ Lippmann, “Unrest,” 320.

the psychic injuries of war.³⁴ Yet in that same article, Lippmann wrote that vehemence must yield to veracity, which hewed closer to his sentiments in the *Atlantic* essays.³⁵ In those works, he maintained that true liberty could exist only if free expression was protected at all times – protected from distortion, propaganda and lies.³⁶ Lippmann would define freedom of opinion ideally “as freedom from error, illusion, and misinterpretation.”³⁷

When Lippmann wrote that suppression of free expression led to tension and sterility of thought, he made it clear he was referring to beliefs backed by facts. “Men cease to say what they think, and when they cease to say it, they soon cease to think it,” he wrote. “They think in reference to their critics and not in reference to the facts.”³⁸ Lippmann maintained that even the most ardent supporters of liberty never proposed a theory in which freedom of expression was absolute. He described how other theorists had justified limits on speech “to the effect that ‘of course’ the freedom granted shall not be employed too destructively” – a “weasel clause” Lippmann called it – and always, he noted, to suppress opinions not aligned with their own values.³⁹ Thus, he argued, liberty had only ever been guaranteed in matters of little consequence. In its current manifestation, liberty was arbitrary; it remained vulnerable to circumstance. “When men feel themselves secure, heresy is cultivated as the spice of life,” Lippmann wrote. “During a war liberty disappears as the community feels itself menaced.... In other words,

³⁴ “Time and energy that should go to building and restoring are instead... fighting a guerilla war against misunderstanding and intolerance.” *Liberty and the News*, 11.

³⁵ Lippmann, “Unrest,” 320.

³⁶ *Liberty and the News*, 37.

³⁷ *Liberty and the News*, 39.

³⁸ *Liberty and the News*, 11.

³⁹ *Liberty and the News*, 15.

when men are not afraid, they are not afraid of ideas; when they are much afraid, they are afraid of anything that seems, or can even be made to appear, seditious.”⁴⁰ Lippmann’s insistence on protecting opinion from corruption implied untrue opinions should not enjoy the same protection.⁴¹

In a time of great insecurity, certain opinions acting on unstable minds may cause infinite disaster. Knowing that such opinions necessarily originate in slender evidence, that they are propelled more by prejudice from the rear than by any reference to realities, it seems to me that to build the case for liberty upon the dogma of their unlimited prerogatives is to build it upon the poorest foundation. For, even though we grant that the world is best served by the liberty of all opinion, the plain fact is that men are too busy and too much concerned to fight more than spasmodically for such liberty.⁴²

Even as he advocated for objectivity and rallied for facts, Lippmann pinned his hopes for democracy on a “Public” that bore little resemblance to the actual public, the public which was susceptible to propaganda and prone to a herd mentality.⁴³ His idealized “Public” was non-partisan, reasonable and free from prejudice. He reserved the honorific for a small subset of the general population: “those who in any crisis are seeking the truth and not advocating their dogma.”⁴⁴ Lippmann’s lofty description indicated that, during

⁴⁰ *Liberty and the News*, 17.

⁴¹ “Mr. Lippmann vindicates his own theory of liberty by refusing to permit freedom of opinion to those who fail to adhere to his own faith in facts.” *New York Times*, “Fact and Fancy as to ‘Suppression of News,’” March 21, 1920, 1.

⁴² *Liberty and the News*, 38. Lippmann’s correspondence during this period dispels any notion that his support of freedom for even verifiable expression was absolute. He insisted the press recognize the distinction between the private affairs of public men. Lippmann took issue with a manuscript by Heber Blankenhorn, whom he worked with in propaganda, which recounted dinner conversations the two men enjoyed with their British cohorts. In a letter demanding the book’s publisher remove all reference to him, Lippmann referred to the stories as “a gross violation of hospitality extended to a group of American officers by British officials” and called it “an act of bad faith.” Lippmann to Ferris Greenslet, April 19, 1919, WLP.

⁴³ “At the present time a nation easily acts like a crowd.” *Liberty and the News*, 33.

⁴⁴ Lippmann, “Unrest,” 320.

this period in the evolution of his views, he maintained a degree of confidence that public opinion could be reformed, that knowledge could overcome bias, and that his ideal might one day be realized, a time when “when evidence, not mere jaw, will then decide.”⁴⁵

Without a disentangled Public the unending clash of Ins and Outs, Haves and Have Nots, Reds and Whites is likely to be sheer commotion. No doubt there is much that is insincere and much that is maudlin said about the Public. The news system of the world being what it is, it is possible to fool most of the Public a good part of the time. The Public is one of those ideals, if you like, which we miss oftener than we attain. But it is a precious ideal. It is the only way we have of formulating our belief that reason is the final test of action, that mere push and pull are not by themselves to set the issues and render the decision.⁴⁶

Consistent with his views in the previous period, Lippmann’s faith that facts would lead to a well-reasoned public opinion remained strong. What shifted was where he now focused his criticism: it was no longer the “bewildered herd” but the press that posed the biggest challenge to achieving the democratic ideal.⁴⁷ The press, Lippmann concluded, bore an obligation to inform, rather than misinform, the public. And while his support of freedom of expression was equivocal, in one regard Lippmann remained absolute: “It may be bad to suppress a particular opinion,” he wrote, “but the really deadly thing is to suppress the news.”⁴⁸

Lippmann’s views on the press during this period

“The news about the news needs to be told.”⁴⁹

Lippmann no longer considered the shortcomings of the press mere inadequacies, but rather “the supreme danger which confronts popular government.”⁵⁰ He explained

⁴⁵ Lippmann, “Unrest,” 320.

⁴⁶ Lippmann, “Unrest,” 321.

⁴⁷ *Liberty and the News*, 8.

⁴⁸ *Liberty and the News*, 38.

⁴⁹ *Liberty and the News*, 9.

that as government grew more responsive to public opinion, representative government had been replaced with “government by newspaper.”⁵¹ As he described it, “the news is the chief source of the opinion by which government now proceeds.”⁵² This alarmed Lippmann. He viewed the press as powerful gatekeepers, and urged it to use its power honorably, insisting “there can be no higher law in journalism than to tell the truth and shame the devil.”⁵³ During this period, Lippmann felt the press was not telling the truth, so he elected to tell the truth about the press. His major works during this brief period laid out his indictment against journalists.

The most destructive form of untruth is sophistry and propaganda by those whose profession is to report the news. The news columns are common carriers. When those who control them arrogate to themselves the right to determine by their own consciences what shall be reported and for what purpose, democracy is unworkable. Public opinion is blockaded. For when a people can no longer confidently repair ‘to the best fountains for their information,’ then anyone’s guess and anyone’s rumor, each man’s hopes and each man’s whim becomes the basis of government.⁵⁴

As the population moved from small communities to big cities, as government departments multiplied, as the nation became increasingly involved in foreign affairs, it became decidedly difficult to follow everything happening at a local, state and national level.⁵⁵ “What men who make studies of politics a vocation cannot do, the man who has an hour a day for newspapers and talk cannot possibly hope to do,” Lippmann wrote. “He must seize catchwords and headlines or nothing.”⁵⁶ Lippmann allowed that the

⁵⁰ *Liberty and the News*, 6.

⁵¹ *Liberty and the News*, 36.

⁵² *Liberty and the News*, 6.

⁵³ *Liberty and the News*, 7.

⁵⁴ *Liberty and the News*, 5-6.

⁵⁵ Lippmann admitted he knew little of local interests outside his own city. “I have not the vaguest idea of what Brooklyn is interested in.” *Liberty and the News*, 31.

⁵⁶ *Liberty and the News*, 22-23.

complexity of the issues facing the country made it difficult for reporters as well as the public to make sense of it all, a theme he would advance in *Public Opinion*. “News comes from a distance; it comes helter-skelter, in inconceivable confusion; it deals with matters that are not easily understood; it arrives and is assimilated by busy and tired people who must take what is given to them,” he wrote.⁵⁷ In *Liberty and the News*, Lippmann likened the role of newsgathering in the formation of public opinion to the proceedings of a legal trial. He wrote of the unreliability of eyewitnesses and compared the public to a jury reaching verdicts based on false testimony.⁵⁸ Unlike a legal trial, there was no penalty for perjury in newsgathering nor was it required to adhere to any rules of evidence. “If I lie in a lawsuit involving the fate of my neighbor’s cow, I can go to jail,” Lippmann wrote. “But if I lie to a million readers in a matter involving war and peace, I can lie my head off, and, if I choose the right series of lies, be entirely irresponsible.”⁵⁹ Lippmann cast himself in the role of court administrator, repeatedly imploring the press to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

Although he wrote that “the mechanism of the news-supply has developed without plan, and there is no one point in it at which one can fix responsibility for truth,” Lippmann viewed the editor as the linchpin in the entire enterprise.⁶⁰ He held the newspaper editor, as the arbiter of public opinion, liable for the failings of the press.⁶¹

⁵⁷ *Liberty and the News*, 23.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* “The jury is the whole community, not even the qualified voters alone. The jury is everybody who creates public sentiment – chattering gossips, unscrupulous liars, congenital liars, feeble-minded people, prostitute minds, corrupting agents.”

⁵⁹ *Liberty and the News*, 23-24.

⁶⁰ *Liberty and The News*, 25.

⁶¹ *Liberty and the News*, 28. The editor “has to decide the question which is of more importance than any other in the formation of opinions, the question where attention is to be directed.”

The news of the day as it reaches the newspaper office is an incredible medley of fact, propaganda, rumor, suspicion, clues, hopes, and fears, and the task of selecting and ordering that news is one of the truly sacred and priestly offices in a democracy. For the newspaper is in all literalness the bible of democracy...It is the only serious book most people read. It is the only book they read every day. (The editor has) the power to determine each day what shall seem important and what shall be neglected.⁶²

In his first two books, Lippmann maintained that the press engaged in self-censorship out of fear of alienating the public. During the war, Lippmann considered government-sanctioned press restrictions the biggest threat to the free exchange of information: Americans were presented with a slanted view the war.⁶³ The censors, Lippmann wrote, “abolished all possibility of telling the unprejudiced and unvarnished truth,” as they could easily conjure a reason to justify any news they sought to suppress.⁶⁴ “So the censor made the news vacuum; then the propagandist filled it.”⁶⁵ The barriers impeding the transmission of accurate news about the war across the Atlantic were many: overseas cable transmissions were censored for both political and military concerns; news items were censored not only for substance, but also for presentation, page position and even font choice; cable access was hampered not just by cost, but due to demand and the limited capacity of transatlantic cable.⁶⁶ Lippmann argued that even the reporters covering the events overseas relied on second-hand news.⁶⁷ “Most people,” he wrote,

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Although publishers and editors were arrested under the Sedition Act during WWI, the press supposedly engaged in “voluntary” censorship; the issue was not magically resolved after the war.

⁶⁴ Lippmann, “Unrest,” 318.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ “Undesirable messages are not infrequently served badly.” *Liberty and the News*, 27.

⁶⁷ “What the correspondents...reported day by day was what they were told at press headquarters, and of that only what they were allowed to tell.” *Liberty and the News*, 26.

“seem to believe that, when they meet a war correspondent or a special writer from the Peace Conference, they have seen a man who has seen the things he wrote about. Far from it. Nobody saw this war.”⁶⁸

After the war, Lippmann once again blamed the press for the tepid state of news reporting, although he felt its motives had changed. “Since the war, especially, editors have come to believe that their highest duty is not to report but instruct,” he wrote, “not to print news, but to save civilization.”⁶⁹ It was not just that journalists misunderstood their role in democracy; Lippmann accused the press of actively engaging in suppression and distortion to promote their own points of view. “The work of reporters has thus become confused with the work of preachers, revivalists, prophets and agitators,” he wrote. “The current theory of American newspaperdom is that an abstraction like the truth and a grace like fairness must be sacrificed whenever anyone thinks the necessities of civilization require the sacrifice.”⁷⁰ After the war, publishers and editors assumed the role of the censor: they would decide what the public did and did not need to know. Editors, Lippmann wrote, “are on the whole curiously unanimous in their selection and in their emphasis. Once you know the party and the social affiliation of a newspaper, you can predict with considerable certainty the perspective in which the news will be

⁶⁸ Ibid. A memo from Ralph Hayes to Secretary of War Newton Baker supports Lippmann’s allegations about news coming out of the peace conference: “The entire delegation of newspaper men – allied as well as American – at the Peace Conference, are bitterly incensed over the action of the Conference yesterday decreeing that news of the conference will be given out solely in the form of a communiqué prepared by the Secretaries of the commissions. . . . The attitude of the writers is exceedingly hostile and defiant at what they consider the repudiation of the first of the Fourteen Points – open covenants openly arrived at.” Hayes to Baker, Jan. 16, 1919, Newton Baker Papers.

⁶⁹ *Liberty and the News*, 3. The *NYT* wrote that Lippmann had “inadequate comprehension” of the reporter and editor’s duties and his suggested reforms were “invalidated by his apparent faith in the ancient myth of ‘suppression of the news.’”

⁷⁰ *Liberty and the News*, 4.

displayed.”⁷¹ Whereas Lippmann had once warned about the tyranny of the majority, he now worried that a relatively small group of journalists had wrested control of public information. “That minority, which is proudly prepared to think for it, and not only prepared, but cocksure that it alone knows how to think for it, has adopted the theory that the public should know what is good for it.”⁷²

Amid all the press criticism raised in *Liberty and the News*, Lippmann singled out *New York Times* publisher Adolph Ochs and British publisher Lord Northcliffe as two whose behavior he found especially egregious.⁷³ “(They) believe that edification is more important than veracity,” he wrote. “They preen themselves upon it. To patriotism, as they define it day to day, all other considerations must yield.”⁷⁴ Lippmann cited C.P. Scott, editor of the *Manchester Guardian* and Frank Cobb, editorial page editor of the *New York World*, as embodying the best practices of modern journalism.⁷⁵ (There was possible self-interest at work here, as Lippmann wrote for Scott’s paper and would soon

⁷¹ *Liberty and the News*, 28.

⁷² *Liberty and the News*, 4.

⁷³ In a critical review of *Liberty and the News*, the *New York Times* took issue with Lippmann’s generalizations of newsroom practices, especially in light of his never having worked as a reporter. “He has never been a newspaper man and, while he knows a good deal about news, most of what he knows is not true.” Regarding his singling out the paper for critique, the *Times* wrote, “he appears to regard THE NEW YORK TIMES as one of the most baleful and pernicious of them all.” Whether the preceding phrase was ultimately prescient or imprudently provoking, just a few months later, in “A Test of the News,” Lippmann would again use the paper to illustrate the failures of journalism. *New York Times*, “Facts and Fancy.” Lippmann’s co-author Merz would go on to serve as the editorial page editor of the *New York Times* from 1938-1961.

⁷⁴ *Liberty and the News*, 5.

⁷⁵ “I won’t try, because I can’t succeed, to tell you what association with a paper of such clean purpose and great competence has meant to me. Whenever I have been in the mood to despair about the press and to wonder whether democratic institutions were workable with the kind of press that we have, I have come back to the *Guardian* as a living illustration of what character and intelligence can actually do in a commercialized world. I am heavily in your debt.” Lippmann to C.P. Scott, November 12, 1920, WLP.

go to work with Cobb). In a February 1920 speech, Lippmann criticized Ochs' paper for declining, in 1918, to print the terms of a Russian Bolshevik proposal to negotiate an early end to the war; Allied officials deemed it an insincere piece of Soviet propaganda. Lippmann, however, made clear his thoughts on the *New York Times'* editorial decision. "There is the censorship," he said, "the absolute denial that the American people have a right to know the terms of a peace offer made to their government by another government." He noted that, in another instance, the *Times* had published unattributed information – "in quotes, verbatim" – that could not be substantiated: a report from Berlin about an unnamed Russian assumed to be secret leader of the Soviet movement, speaking at a secret meeting of leading Communists, whose identities were also unknown. Lippmann categorized this second item as pure speculation and hearsay; he found the juxtaposition between the two standards jarring.

Out of that soil, that soil of blockaded news and advertised fiction, have grown groups of people who have conducted the red hysteria. Moderate people, people with a sense of evidence, people who seek the truth about things they talk about, faced with that kind of thing, have been unable to take a position, to make up their minds. Some of these people are inspired by sinister motives. Some are partly hysterical, but those who are most interested are those who are fanatically self-righteous. There are people in this country to-day who believe that they are chosen by God or by the Union League Club to save this country from contamination.⁷⁶

Still, Lippmann was not yet finished with the *New York Times*. He would once more use that paper to illustrate the failures of the press. His next examination of the *Times*, however, would present quantified, objective criticisms that bolstered and confirmed his subjective appraisals.

⁷⁶ Norman Hapgood, *The Advancing Hour* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1920), xviii.

Liberty and the News and “A Test of the News” expanded upon an idea Lippmann previously touched on in *The Stakes of Diplomacy* (1915): the challenges of reporting on foreign affairs. Lippmann and Charles Merz analyzed *The New York Times*’ coverage of the Bolshevik Revolution, publishing their results as “A Test of the News,” a 42-page supplement to the *New Republic*.⁷⁷ To assess the accuracy of the *Times*’ reporting, Lippmann and Merz examined more than three thousand news items on events in Russia that appeared in the paper over a thirty-six month period, from March 1917 to March 1920.⁷⁸ They listed five reasons the *New York Times* was selected for the study, each one complimentary.⁷⁹ Their conclusions, however, were harsh: “On every essential question the net effect of the news was almost invariably wrong.”⁸⁰ The failures constituted a dereliction of duty. “Not incidentally, not accidentally, but persistently,” Lippmann and Merz wrote, “the news served a purpose which was not the truth which frail, but disinterested human nature could secure.”⁸¹ Their findings echoed Lippmann’s

⁷⁷ Merz joined the *World* in 1924, and the *New York Times* in 1931.

⁷⁸ The *NYT* review of *Liberty and the News* defended American coverage of events in Russia, saying the language barrier made reporting exceedingly difficult: “Any editor will feel that the best practical method for handling Russia is to print all the stories he can get about Russia, ascribing each one to its proper source, and giving where possible an indication of the opinions of the man who made this statement or that so that the reader can form some idea of the possible deflection due to his ideas. and if editorial conclusions differ from Mr. Lippmann’s it does not necessarily follow that the editor has been bought by General Deniken.” *New York Times*, “Facts and Fancy.”

⁷⁹ The reasons were so complimentary, in fact, the first reason (“As great as any newspaper in America, and far greater than the majority”) was repeated, perhaps for emphasis, at the end of the list (“and fifth, because the *Times* is one of the really great newspapers in the world”). Lippmann and Merz, “A Test of the News,” 1.

⁸⁰ Lippmann and Merz, “More News from the *Times*,” 299.

⁸¹ Walter Lippmann and Charles Merz, “A Test of the News:’ Some Criticisms,” *New Republic*, September 8, 1920, 33

assessment of the press in *Liberty and the News*: “This touches the core of democracy, for without reliable and disinterested news, representative democracy is a farce.”⁸²

While acknowledging the demands faced by reporters working on deadline, Lippmann and Merz asserted those difficulties were all the more reason that studies such as theirs should be conducted, and conducted regularly. “Since human beings are poor witnesses, easily thrown off the scent, easily misled by a personal bias, profoundly influenced by their social environment,” they wrote, “does it not follow that a constant testing of the news and a growing self-consciousness about the main source of error is a necessary part of the democratic philosophy?”⁸³ Whatever his motivations in repeatedly holding up the *New York Times* for criticism, Lippmann seemed sincere in his desire to reform journalism. As he wrote to Upton Sinclair at the start of 1920, “The problem of how to get an adequate press seems to me infinitely the most important problem in modern democracy.”⁸⁴ Lippmann was convinced the problem could be resolved.

In April 1921, Lippmann took a six-month sabbatical from the *New Republic*, to reflect more deeply – and, as it turned out, more despairingly – about these issues, retreating to his Long Island beach house to write *Public Opinion*.⁸⁵ He never returned to the magazine. In the next period, he would part with some of his earlier views as well.

⁸² Lippmann and Merz, “Some Criticisms,” 33.

⁸³ Lippmann and Merz, “Some Criticisms,” 32.

⁸⁴ Lippmann to Upton Sinclair, January 27, 1920, WLP.

⁸⁵ Steel, 177.

PART II; CHAPTER THREE

1922-1924

You cannot take more political wisdom out of human beings than there is in them.

– Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*

During the first period in the evolution of Walter Lippmann's views, he graduated from Harvard University (1910), published his first book (1913), helped found the *New Republic* (1914), and authored one of the most successful propaganda pamphlets of World War I (1918).¹ The first year of the current period was marked by two professional milestones: In 1922, Lippmann joined the *New York World* as an assistant editorial page editor, and he published his classic work, *Public Opinion*. His influence grew along with his platform as his career path continued its upward trajectory, and his views on the press and public opinion evolved at a similarly rapid pace. In the two preceding periods examined in this study, Lippmann recalibrated various theories as he sought to align the functions of the press and public opinion with the goals of democracy. He embraced and abandoned passion in favor of reason as an appropriate source of opinion, shifted the blame for the challenges faced by democracy from an indifferent public to an inadequate press, and alternately championed the rights of the public even as he derided "the bewildered herd." He never, however, wavered in his conviction that facts must be the basis of any remedy, the foundation of any reform. During this period, Lippmann approached the issues he had been puzzling over for so long from an entirely different

¹ In the two months he engaged in propaganda work during WWI, Lippmann's unit "produced more than 5 million copies of eighteen different pamphlets." He authored a pamphlet urging German soldiers to surrender; those who did were promised the same rations enjoyed by American troops. It was "the most effective of all American propaganda material and the one found most often on captured German soldiers." Steel, 148.

angle, debuting a new theory that, while essentially negating many of his earlier premises, reconciled the incongruent elements in his previous views on the press and public opinion, at least temporarily.

In *Public Opinion*, Lippmann analyzed the psychological aspects of opinion formation. He concluded that the distortions were so inherently ingrained, the processes so fundamentally flawed, the correlation between news and truth so tenuous, it invalidated prevailing democratic theories of both the press and public opinion.

The environment with which our public opinions deal is refracted in many ways, by censorship and privacy at the source, by physical and social barriers at the other end, by scanty attention, by the poverty of language, by distraction, by unconscious constellations of feeling, by wear and tear, violence, monotony. These limitations upon our access to that environment combine with the obscurity and complexity of the facts themselves to thwart clearness and justice of perception, to substitute misleading fictions for workable ideas, to deprive us of adequate checks upon those who consciously strive to mislead.”²

In the post-WWI era, the “manufacture of consent” Lippmann first wrote about in 1919 was common practice, public relations a fast-growing profession.³ Society had changed significantly in the years since the utopian ideals of a free press and an omnicompetent public first were conceived. “As social truth is organized to-day,” Lippmann wrote, “the press is not constituted to furnish from one edition to the next the amount of knowledge which the democratic theory of public opinion demands.”⁴ Both the press and the public lacked the resources to uncover truth at a time when the truth was

² Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (Blacksburg, VA: Wilder Publications, 2010), 46.

³ As “the manufacture of what is usually called consent.” *Liberty and the News*, 37.

⁴ *Public Opinion*, 195.

not readily discoverable.⁵ The original democrats had not envisioned the complexity of the modern world.⁶ The ideal would have to yield to reality. Objective facts could not conquer personal bias and deeply held stereotypes; public opinion could not govern. Unbiased news could not defeat widespread rumors and political propaganda; it was an unfair fight the press could not win. Newspapers could not rescue democracy.

Lippmann's view on public opinion during this period

“In real life no one acts on the theory that he can have a public opinion on every public question.”⁷

During this period, Lippmann abandoned the last of his pre-war ideals concerning the press and public opinion – the notion that objective news would inevitably lead to a well-reasoned public opinion (although he did not suspend his perennial campaign for the primacy of facts in public debate). The events of the world were simply too complex for reporters to accurately document and the gist of the issues too cryptic for men to decipher.⁸ “In putting together our public opinions, not only do we have to picture more space than we can see with our eyes, and more time than we can feel,” he wrote, “but we have to describe and judge more people, more actions, more things than we can ever count, or vividly imagine.”⁹ Lippmann's thinking on the subject had crystallized, and *Public Opinion* crystallized the concept for readers. Rational public opinion, however,

⁵ “Institutions, having failed to furnish themselves with instruments of knowledge, have become a bundle of ‘problems’ which the population as a whole, reading the press as a whole, is supposed to solve.” *Public Opinion*, 196.

⁶ “Democracy in its original form never seriously faced the problem which arises because the pictures in our heads do not automatically correspond with the world outside.” *Public Opinion*, 22.

⁷ *Public Opinion*, 213.

⁸ *Public Opinion*, 22.

⁹ *Public Opinion*, 84.

remained difficult to crystalize. Prejudices, stereotypes and symbols held more sway than facts. Like an elaborate game of telephone, the dissemination of information grew less reliable the further it spread from its source; facts were misunderstood, manipulated and misrepresented at every step.¹⁰ What emerged, after a bit of news made its rounds, seldom bore more than a passing resemblance to the original event. “The way we see things,” he wrote, “is a combination of what is there and of what we expected to find.”¹¹

It was difficult, Lippmann explained, for people to comprehend the details concerning complex events they did not directly witness. Because most newsworthy events and political issues unfolded beyond their physical environments, men relied on “pictures in their heads,” or stereotypes, to navigate the invisible landscapes.¹² “We are not equipped to deal with so much subtlety, so much variety, so many permutations and combinations,” he wrote.¹³ Instead, the general public operated in the realm of “pseudo-environments,” enhanced by “fictions” that approximated their limited view of the world. These internal filters operated in a manner similar to censorship and propaganda; they obstructed knowledge and obscured the truth. “Obviously our public opinion is in intermittent contact with complexes of all sorts; with ambition and economic interest, personal animosity, racial prejudice, class feeling and what not.” Lippmann wrote. “They distort our reading, our thinking, our talking and our behavior in a great variety of

¹⁰ *Public Opinion*, 96.

¹¹ *Public Opinion*, 66.

¹² “The only feeling that anyone can have about an event he does not experience is the feeling aroused by his mental image of that event.” *Public Opinion*, 12.

¹³ “We have to reconstruct it on a simpler model before we can manage with it.” *Ibid*, 13.

ways.”¹⁴ The use of stereotypes and other cognitive shortcuts was so instinctive, and, usually, so unreliable, even eyewitness accounts usually involved a “transfiguration” of events.¹⁵

In *Public Opinion*, Lippmann challenged the soundness of a basic tenet of democracy. Based on his analysis of opinion formation, he insisted that the democratic ideal of the self-governing man was no longer viable.¹⁶ This romanticized vision of the citizenry, he argued, was premised on the fallacy “that a reasoned righteousness welled up spontaneously out of the mass of men.”¹⁷ Original theories of democracy, contingent on the consent of the governed, hinged on the assumption of a public endowed with an innate knowledge of public affairs.¹⁸ This assumption gave rise to the myth of the omniscient citizen, who was not only wise, but also, Lippmann marveled, “consistently public-spirited and endowed with an unflagging interest.”¹⁹ (It was certainly convenient, he noted, that “by the age of twenty-one he had his political faculties.”²⁰)

Lippmann had long argued that political science sidestepped the messiness of human nature, focusing instead on systems and institutions; the public, in the aggregate, was cast in an unbilled role as “the undifferentiated voter.”²¹ In that field of sanitized study, the citizen was “an excessively inhuman creature,” Lippmann wrote. “He was pure

¹⁴ *Public Opinion*, 45.

¹⁵ *Public Opinion*, 47.

¹⁶ *Public Opinion*, 138.

¹⁷ *Public Opinion*, 141.

¹⁸ The early democrats assumed “men took in the facts as they took in their breath.” *Public Opinion*, 141-142.

¹⁹ *Public Opinion*, 150.

²⁰ *Public Opinion*, 142.

²¹ Walter Lippmann, “Politics for Politicians,” review of *The American Party System* by Charles Merriam, *New Republic*, October 25, 1922, 18.

brain. He was reason incarnate.”²² This approach, which Lippmann first wrote about in *A Preface to Politics*, resulted in the study of government as “it was presumed to exist in a platonic heaven before it fell to earth.”²³ Public opinion, perhaps not surprisingly, was also considered – if it was considered at all – as a phenomenon curiously devoid of mere mortals. In the event it became necessary to account for how it was possible that masses of individuals, with their competing motivations and their conflicting interests, could arrive at a consensus in public affairs, public opinion was invoked as an almighty universal force, conjured by a mystical oversoul “which imposes order upon random opinion.”²⁴ During the war, the driving interest in public opinion concerned how to either co-opt it, as the Wilson administration attempted with the Committee on Public Information, or subvert it, as both Allied and German propaganda endeavored to. Prior to Lippmann’s *Public Opinion*, little thought was given to how public opinion came to be.²⁵ “The existence of a force called Public Opinion,” Lippmann wrote, “is in the main taken for granted.”²⁶

While Lippmann wrote in terms of the general population, often utilizing the editorial “we” as if to include himself, he nevertheless questioned the emotional and intellectual fitness of some citizens to form opinion:

And finally since opinions do not stop at the normal members of society, since for purposes of an election, a propaganda, a following, numbers constitute power, the quality of attention is still further depressed. The mass of absolutely illiterate, of feeble-minded, grossly neurotic, undernourished and frustrated individuals, is very considerable, much more considerable there is reason to think than we generally suppose.

²² Lippmann, “Politics for Politicians,” 18.

²³ Lippmann, “Politics for Politicians,” 17.

²⁴ *Public Opinion*, 110.

²⁵ *Public Opinion*, 139.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Thus a wide popular appeal is circulated among persons who are mentally children or barbarians, people whose lives are a morass of entanglements, people whose vitality is exhausted, shut-in people, and people whose experience has comprehended no factor in the problem under discussion. The stream of public opinion is stopped by them in little eddies of misunderstanding, where it is discolored with prejudice and far fetched analogy.²⁷

Lippmann regarded the presumption that the public should form an opinion on every public question as further evidence that the democratic ideal of the self-governing man was misconceived.²⁸ He maintained that most people had little direct knowledge of, or sustained interest in, the majority of public affairs on which they were expected to hold opinions.²⁹ The general public, Lippmann insisted, had no burning desire for self-government.³⁰ Modern man's limited attention suffered from both internal and external distractions. "Every man whose business it is to think knows that he must for part of the day create about himself a pool of silence," Lippmann wrote. "But in the helter-skelter which we flatter by the name of civilization, the citizen performs the perilous business of government under the worst possible conditions."³¹ The public, understandably, invested its mental resources in meeting the immediate concerns of daily life; man was self-centered, Lippmann explained, out of necessity. Obviously, he wrote, those "self-centered opinions are not sufficient to procure good government."³²

²⁷ *Public Opinion*, 45-46.

²⁸ "The pioneer democrats did not possess the material for resolving the conflicts between the known range of man's attention and their illimitable faith in his dignity." *Public Opinion*, 143.

²⁹ "Of public affairs, each of us sees very little, and therefore, they remain dull and unappetizing." *Public Opinion*, 91.

³⁰ *Public Opinion*, 170.

³¹ *Public Opinion*, 44. A friend once wrote that Lippmann "is almost the only thoughtful man I know in Washington who never complains that he cannot find time to think." Reston, "The Mockingbird and the Taxicab," 230-231.

³² *Public Opinion*, 169.

Mass action was most effective in the limited context of giving consent: saying, or, more specifically, voting, yes or no for a candidate or an issue.³³ Some members of society, as Lippmann had previously argued, were unfit to participate in even that most fundamental of democratic actions – voting. “There are two kinds of uninstructed voter,” he explained. “There is the man who does not know and knows that he does not know. He is generally an enlightened person.” Enlightened, in Lippmann’s estimation, because this man voluntarily forfeited his right to vote. Of the two types, he directed his disdain at the uninformed man who persisted in exercising his rights at the ballot box. Although this man, too, was “uninstructed,” the difference was that he either did not know, or else he did not care that he was ignorant. “He can always be gotten to the polls,” Lippmann wrote.³⁴ The real power resided with the party machine, which employed propaganda and deployed symbols to maintain unity among the “rank and file.”³⁵ Throughout government, industry, and institutions, Lippmann found no evidence of a mass of individuals who governed as a group. “Nowhere,” he declared, “is the idyllic theory of democracy realized.”³⁶

From the start of his career, Lippmann had advocated for fact as the antidote to ill-formed opinion. But facts could be exceedingly intricate and hopelessly bland, and remained largely unknown. Only disinterested men could be trusted to investigate issues based solely on, preferably quantitative, facts, employing the scientific method to draw conclusions. Only experts could make sense of the findings. Because men could be

³³ “The Many can elect after the Few have nominated.” *Public Opinion*, 130.

³⁴ *Public Opinion*, 168.

³⁵ *Public Opinion*, 130.

³⁶ *Public Opinion*, 127.

experts in only a few subjects, at most, even experts depended on outside sources for information. “Democratic theory,” Lippmann wrote, “proceeds on the opposite assumption and assumes for the purposes of government an unlimited supply of self-sufficient individuals.”³⁷ Lippmann stated that the public relied on its social set and newspapers for most of its information. But the leaders of a social set likely possessed an only slightly larger worldview than its members and were susceptible to the same prejudices and distorted views.³⁸ He encouraged the public to seek out expert counsel. Lippmann went on to argue that increasing reliance on experts, or, at a minimum, being open to what they had to say, was “the utmost independence we can exercise.”³⁹

Because of the inherent difficulty in sorting out the details of an endlessly complicated world, Lippmann recommended citizens should limit the issues about which they form opinions. Realistic opinions, based on data and analysis, required vigorous effort to reach as opposed to casual opinions based on emotions and stereotypes. Lippmann revived his argument for insiders versus outsiders, framing the role of experts as an almost altruistic service that freed outsider citizens to pursue only those matters that directly affected them. In this conception of insiders and outsiders, Lippmann urged the public to take its cues from experts. “Complete independence in the universe is simply unthinkable,” he wrote. “If we could not take practically everything for granted, we should spend our lives in utter triviality.”⁴⁰ He recommended the heavy lifting be left to the experts and the intelligence bureaus, those with the qualifications to discern the facts,

³⁷ *Public Opinion*, 125.

³⁸ Unless you were a member of the elite: “The private affairs of this set are public matters, and public matters are its private, often its family affairs.” *Public Opinion*, 34.

³⁹ *Public Opinion*, 125.

⁴⁰ *Public Opinion*, 125.

with their recommendations then passed on to the executives and the specialty men, those with the authority to make the decisions and take action. Serious analysis of facts was the province of insiders. The general public need not be concerned.

The ranks of people working in publicity and public relations exploded after WWI.⁴¹ The challenge facing government by consent, according to Lippmann, was that modern government was growing more sensitive to public opinion at the same time the means to manipulate that consent was multiplying.⁴² Although he once believed the press might achieve the democratic ideal that was no longer the case. “The Court of Public Opinion, open day and night, is to lay down the law for everything all the time,” Lippmann wrote. “It is not workable. And when you consider the nature of the news, it is not even thinkable.”⁴³

Lippmann’s view on the press during this period

“The trouble lies deeper than the press, and so does the remedy.”⁴⁴

Lippmann’s thesis in *Public Opinion* – that too much was expected of the press – was at odds with his earlier contention that the failures of the press resulted from a lack of effort on its part, a point that he and Merz emphasized with “A Test of the News.” The democratic ideal demanded that the modern press overcome the obstacles to sound public opinion and compensate for the deficiencies of government. (The press, like education, was held up as a solution for all manner of society’s ills.) During this period, Lippmann

⁴¹ “The development of the publicity man is a clear sign that the facts of modern life do not spontaneously take a shape in which they can be known.” *Public Opinion*, 187.

⁴² That “the opportunities for manipulation (are) open to anyone who understands the process are plain enough. . . . None of us begins to understand the consequences, but it is no daring prophecy to say that the knowledge of how to create consent will alter every political calculation and modify every political premise.” *Public Opinion*, 138.

⁴³ *Public Opinion*, 196.

⁴⁴ *Public Opinion*, 197.

argued the press could not meet its obligations due to structural limitations and insufficient resources; much like the myth of the self-governing man, the powers bestowed upon the press did not correspond with its ability to execute them.⁴⁵ The press, Lippmann wrote, “is too frail to carry the burden of popular sovereignty, to supply spontaneously the truth which democrats hoped was inborn.”⁴⁶ He insisted such expectations, like the ones placed on the public, were unrealistic; the press encountered the same barriers to information that the public faced.⁴⁷ “If the newspapers, then, are to be charged with the duty of translating the whole public life of mankind, so that every adult can arrive at an opinion on every moot topic, they fail, they are bound to fail, in any future one can conceive they will continue to fail.”⁴⁸

The confounding factor, as Lippmann identified it during this period, was one of economics. Newspapers were commercial enterprises, yet regarded as a public service and held to the same ethical standards as a non-profit.⁴⁹ Although the press possessed finite resources of time, talent, and money, the public expected it to provide limitless coverage of a vast and complex world. Its product was undervalued.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ *Public Opinion*, 196.

⁴⁶ *Public Opinion*, 174-175.

⁴⁷ “We misunderstand the limited nature of news, the illimitable complexity of society; we overestimate our own endurance, public spirit, and all-around competence.” *Public Opinion*, 196.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Lippmann wrote that critics, echoing “the moral standards of the community,” judged the press as they would a school or a church. “This illustrates again the concave character of democracy.” *Public Opinion*, 175.

⁵⁰ “A free press, if you judge by the attitude of the readers, means newspapers that are virtually given away.” *Ibid.*

The insistent and ancient belief that truth is not earned, but inspired, revealed, supplied gratis, comes out very plainly in our economic prejudices as readers of newspapers. We expect the newspaper to serve us with truth however unprofitable the truth may be. For this difficult and often dangerous service, which we recognize as fundamental, we expected to pay until recently the smallest coin turned out by the mint.⁵¹

The strange relationship between the press and the public was unlike that of any other industry's with its customers; Lippmann referred to it as "an anomaly of our civilization."⁵² The reader pledged no loyalty to his daily paper. Circulation, Lippmann wrote, was "based not on a marriage contract with their readers, but on free love."⁵³ Advertising, not circulation, supported newspapers. Although circulation could be a point of pride for a publication, its true value lay in attracting advertisers.⁵⁴ Advertisers wanted to reach potential customers, and newspapers depended on advertising revenue; therefore, both courted the same audience – customers with a measure of disposable income. It was this portion of the population, "the buying public," toward which the newspaper geared its content.⁵⁵ Of course, the buying public tended to work in the same industries that advertised in newspapers; and editors were frequently members of the same social set as the advertisers. Because most newspapers targeted a select segment of readers, newspaper editors tended to conform to certain conventions. Lippmann no longer raised

⁵¹ *Public Opinion*, 175.

⁵² "Nobody thinks for a moment that he ought to pay for his newspaper. He expects the fountains of truth to bubble, but he enters into no contract, legal or moral, involving any risk, cost or trouble to himself. He will pay a nominal price when it suits him, will stop paying whenever it suits him, will turn to another paper when that suits him." *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Public Opinion*, 178.

⁵⁴ "The citizen will pay for his telephone, his railroad rides, his motor car, his entertainment. But he does not pay openly for his news. He will, however, pay handsomely for the privilege of having someone read about him." *Public Opinion*, 176.

⁵⁵ *Public Opinion*, 177.

questions about the conformity of the news as he had previously. Advertising revenue provided the economic incentive for newspapers to adopt the mores of the buying public.

Every day and against an unremitting deadline, editors had to make an array of decisions based on the allocation of resources: audience, advertisers, attention, space limitations, page placement, and the limits of their own attention. “Without standardization, without stereotypes, without routine judgments, without a fairly ruthless disregard of subtlety,” Lippmann wrote, “the editor would soon die of excitement.”⁵⁶ Editors’ preference for “the indisputable fact” alleviated some of the pressure, as a concrete detail was less open to interpretation, was less emotionally charged, and, therefore, was less likely to offend a reader or an advertiser.⁵⁷ “All the subtler and deeper truths are,” Lippmann wrote, “very unreliable truths. They involve judgment.”⁵⁸ During this period, he took a more charitable view of the newspaper editor’s performance than he had in previous books.⁵⁹ He returned to the idea that the news is self-censored, to a degree, by the editor’s obligation to weigh news values against economic concerns. Accordingly, editorial decisions were not based solely on journalistic standards or even on the editor’s personal preference, but on what would attract – and hold – the customers’ attention.⁶⁰ “Somebody has said quite aptly,” Lippmann wrote, “that the newspaper editor has to be re-elected every day.”⁶¹

⁵⁶ *Public Opinion*, 191.

⁵⁷ *Public Opinion*, 181.

⁵⁸ *Public Opinion*, 190.

⁵⁹ Lippmann accepted a position on the editorial staff of the *World* while still writing *Public Opinion*; but did not officially join the paper before completing the manuscript. Lippmann assumed the post of editorial page editor after Frank Cobb’s death in 1923, and was named editor of the *World* in 1929.

⁶⁰ “He must woo at least a section of his readers every day.” *Public Opinion*, 191.

⁶¹ *Public Opinion*, 175.

Though the buying public constituted only a fraction of the entire population, it had an outsized influence on newsgathering. Many smaller and rural papers, lacking the resources to report on national events, republished coverage provided by the larger metropolitan papers and press associations. Therefore, the general news a majority of people read, regardless of where they lived, actually was targeted toward this small advertising demographic.⁶² Due to the homogeneity of mainstream news reporting, editors sought to distinguish their papers from competitors by running special features, which held more interest for the local reader than general news.⁶³

In order to differentiate themselves and collect a steady public most papers have to go outside the field of general news. They go to the dazzling levels of society, to scandal and crime, to sports, pictures, actresses, advice to the lovelorn, highschool notes, women's pages, buyer's pages, cooking recipes, chess, whist, gardening, comic strips, thundering partisanship, not because publishers and editors are interested in everything but news, but because they have to find some way of holding on to that alleged host of passionately interested readers, who are supposed by some critics of the press to be clamoring for the truth and nothing but the truth.⁶⁴

Contrary to the claims advanced by press critics, news was not, Lippmann insisted, synonymous with the truth.⁶⁵ "The function of the news is to signalize an event," he wrote, "the function of the truth is to bring light to the hidden facts, to set them into relation with each other, and make a picture of the world on which men can act."⁶⁶

Government and industry officials routinely engaged in both censorship and propaganda – Lippmann wrote that one could not exist without the other – and controlled the flow of

⁶² "Roughly speaking, the economic support of general news gathering is in the price paid for advertised goods by the fairly prosperous sections of cities with more than one hundred thousand inhabitants." *Public Opinion*, 177.

⁶³ "We suppose an appetite for uninteresting truths which is not discovered by any honest analysis of our own tastes." *Public Opinion*, 196.

⁶⁴ *Public Opinion*, 180-181.

⁶⁵ *Public Opinion*, 194.

⁶⁶ *Public Opinion*, 194.

available information about social institutions. Anyone of these leaders could, at his discretion, dictate “what facts, in what setting, in what guise he shall permit the public to know.”⁶⁷ It was patently false, Lippmann insisted, to believe the press could uncover facts that institutions failed to record.⁶⁸ The truth demanded documentation. “Everything else,” he wrote, “is argument and opinion.”⁶⁹

When Lippmann wrote that newspapers were the primary source of “the data of our opinions,” he was not suggesting the data was objective.⁷⁰ “There is a very small body of exact knowledge, which it requires no outstanding ability or training to deal with,” Lippmann wrote. “The rest is in the journalist’s own discretion.”⁷¹ The public, he wrote, “reads not the news, but the news with an aura of suggestion about it. It hears reports, not objective as the facts are, but already stereotyped to a certain pattern of behavior.”⁷² And even the most conscientious of reporters was susceptible to subjectivity, his opinions vulnerable to the same biases, prejudices and stereotypes as the general public.⁷³ “His version of the truth,” Lippmann explained, “is only his version.”⁷⁴ Despite his own fidelity to facts, Lippmann seemed resigned to accept that the news would never be truly objective. The costs were too great. “The facts are not simple,” Lippmann wrote, “and not at all obvious.”⁷⁵ Facts could also be hopelessly dull and uninteresting, and dull

⁶⁷ *Public Opinion*, 138.

⁶⁸ *Public Opinion*, 196.

⁶⁹ The press “can normally record only what has been recorded for it by institutions.” *Public Opinion*, 195.

⁷⁰ *Public Opinion*, 38.

⁷¹ *Public Opinion*, 194.

⁷² *Public Opinion*, 135.

⁷³ *Public Opinion*, 190.

⁷⁴ *Public Opinion*, 194.

⁷⁵ *Public Opinion*, 187.

and uninteresting were unlikely to capture the readers' attention.⁷⁶ "The fact that is sensational to the reader," he wrote, "is the fact that almost every journalist will seek."⁷⁷

In regards to the quality of public information available, Lippmann argued that the reporter filled the most valuable and least valued role at the newspaper.⁷⁸ Due to the low pay and low prestige, the job was often considered a way station for ambitious, talented men.⁷⁹ "Newsgathering," Lippmann wrote, "does not attract to itself anything like the number of trained and able men which its public importance would seem to demand."⁸⁰

Lippmann's analyses of the press performance and opinion formation during this period undermined the basis of his criticisms of the *New York Times*' reporting on the Bolshevik Revolution.⁸¹ Scant attention has been drawn to the contradictions between his theses in *Public Opinion* and his specific arguments in "A Test of the News." In a letter from his co-author praising *Public Opinion* and Lippmann's elucidation of the obstacles faced by the press, Merz noted "I wish we'd seen it as clearly when we did the Russian supplement."⁸²

⁷⁶ *Public Opinion*, 193.

⁷⁷ *Public Opinion*, 190.

⁷⁸ *Public Opinion*, 181.

⁷⁹ "The rewards in journalism go to specialty work, to signed correspondence which has editorial quality, to executives, and to men with a knack and flavor of their own." Ibid.

⁸⁰ Lippmann referred to journalism schools as "trade schools." *Public Opinion*, 181. This is not to suggest he didn't hold the profession to high standards. His correspondence shows he was generous with advice to aspiring journalists, and dissuaded the untalented from pursuing newspaper careers: "Your own letter is so candid that perhaps you will pardon a little candor in return. I could not advise you to go into journalism at present because to tell you the truth your grammar is not adequate. You ought really to consider whether your command of English is great enough to justify your attempting to enter an already overcrowded field." Lippmann to Michael Altschuler, April 24, 1917, WLP.

⁸¹ In *Public Opinion*, he wrote that, in addition to military censorship and language barriers, during the revolution Russia "was officially closed to effective news reporting by the fact that the hardest thing to report is chaos." *Public Opinion*, 192.

⁸² Merz to Lippmann, Spring/Summer 1922, WLP.

Also in sharp contrast to his views in *Liberty and the News*, during this period Lippmann maintained that the influence of readers, editors, and publishers over news content “is not the control of truth by prejudice, but of one opinion by another opinion that is not demonstrably less true.”⁸³ For men who had no previous knowledge or preformed opinions on a subject, news items concerning unfamiliar events were “indistinguishable from fiction.”⁸⁴ Lippmann’s examination of cognitive process indicated that different people would interpret information in different ways. The press could not overcome the individual prejudices of the public; the public supplied its own meaning to the news.⁸⁵ Thus, readers trusted or favored papers that reinforced their own views – further evidence that man was self-interested. As Lippmann explained, “What better criterion does the man at the breakfast table possess than that the newspaper version checks up with his own opinion?”⁸⁶

The original democratic theorists ascribed almost mystical powers to the press and the public. Neither could fulfill its ideal in modern society. Although the press was the main source of information on public affairs, the public devoted only a fraction of its attention to the newspaper each day. (Lippmann cited two surveys that found the majority of people spent just fifteen minutes a day reading the newspaper.⁸⁷) Most people did not have time to ponder events that did not directly affect them; it was a luxury few could

⁸³ *Public Opinion*, 195.

⁸⁴ The law makes no provision for accuracy in news, thus the general reader has no recourse. Only the injured party may sue for libel. Lippmann felt local news tended to be more accurate, since the maligned party was more likely to read, and then challenge, misinformation about themselves. *Public Opinion*, 179.

⁸⁵ Lippmann first wrote in *A Preface to Politics* that people choose facts to confirm their biases. *Public Opinion*, 189.

⁸⁶ *Public Opinion*, 179.

⁸⁷ “Very few people have an accurate idea of fifteen minutes, so the figures are not to be taken literally.” *Public Opinion*, 35.

afford.⁸⁸ “We are concerned in public affairs,” Lippmann wrote, “but immersed in our private ones.”⁸⁹ Limited human resources also constrained the press. The democratic ideal held that the press should function as a conduit for the unadulterated transmission of factual information to the public, an obligation Lippmann maintained it was humanly impossible to satisfy. “All the reporters in the world working all the hours of the day could not witness all the happenings in the world,” he wrote.⁹⁰ As it became harder to sustain the myth of the omniscient citizen, the onus for securing the knowledge necessary to form public opinion shifted to the press. In short, democracy expected the press to compensate for its own institutional shortcomings. The democratic ideal, however, overestimated not only the public’s capacity for knowledge but also the ability of the press to provide it.

Unconsciously the theory sets up the single reader as theoretically omniscient, and puts upon the press the burden of accomplishing whatever representative government, industrial organization, and diplomacy have failed to accomplish. Acting upon everybody for thirty minutes in twenty-four hours, the press is asked to create a mystical force called Public Opinion that will take up the slack in public institutions.⁹¹

Lippmann acknowledged and accepted the limitations of both the press and public opinion, and, rather than mandating ambitious reforms, repurposed the proper role of each, suggesting that responsibilities once bestowed upon the press and the public be allocated to experts and “specialty” men instead. “News is like the beam of a searchlight,” he wrote. “Men cannot do the work of the world by this light alone. They

⁸⁸ *Public Opinion*, 39.

⁸⁹ *Public Opinion*, 35.

⁹⁰ *Public Opinion*, 183.

⁹¹ *Public Opinion*, 196.

cannot govern society by episodes, incidents, and eruptions.”⁹² Unlike mainstream news, expert information was intended for use by specialists, although Lippmann suggested some might possibly be appropriate for newspapers. “The common interests very largely elude public opinion entirely,” he wrote, “and can be managed only by a specialized class whose personal interests reach beyond the locality.”⁹³ (In April 1919, Lippmann penned an angry letter addressed to the editor of the *Democratic Chronicle* insisting he had never implied government should be run by experts.)⁹⁴

While many scholars consider *Public Opinion* Lippmann’s farewell to progressivism and the start of his alleged turn toward conservatism, the book closes with a reiteration of his belief that the democratic experiment could still succeed, albeit in a reimagined manner, and only with sustained effort. Despite his disenchantment with traditional democratic theory, Lippmann did not consider himself anti-democratic, but, rather, pragmatic. He may have outgrown his youthful idealism, but he had not grown cynical. “And if amidst all the evils of this decade, you have not seen men and women, known moments that you would like to multiply,” Lippmann wrote on the final page of *Public Opinion*, “the Lord himself cannot help you.”⁹⁵

⁹² *Public Opinion*, 197.

⁹³ *Public Opinion*, 169.

⁹⁴ Lippmann called it an “absurd notion,” writing “God save us from any such plan...I don’t expect you to make any correction, as the matter is of no importance. Being an editor myself, I know how easy it is to jump to conclusions on inaccurate information.” Lippmann, to editor, *Democratic Chronicle* (sic), Rochester, NY, April 26, 1919, WLP.

⁹⁵ *Public Opinion*, 225.

PART II; CHAPTER FOUR
1925-1951

Although public business is my main interest and I give most of my time to watching it, I cannot find time to do what is expected of me in the theory of democracy; that is, to know what is going on and to have an opinion worth expressing on every question which confronts a self-governing community. And I have not happened to meet anybody, from a President of the United States to a professor of political science, who came anywhere near to embodying the accepted ideal of the sovereign and omniscient citizen.

– Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public*

The twenty-six years covered in this chapter – the longest continuously consistent span in the evolution of Walter Lippmann’s views on the press and public opinion – coincided with a period of long-term stability in his career, his thirty-six year tenure at the *New York Herald Tribune*.¹ As he settled into his role as an influential and well-respected syndicated newspaper columnist, his views on the press became noticeably more positive. In contrast, Lippmann, who from his earliest writings had wrestled with reforming public opinion, no longer believed it could be salvaged. Instead, he insisted that public opinion must be reined in. Many of Lippmann’s earlier views reached maturation during this time, his disparate theses on the press and public opinion coalesced, informed by a well-honed pragmatism that obscured much of the idealism on display in his younger years. He also published 17 books: Although many were reprints of his newspaper columns, this phenomenal output was on par with his national stature.

Lippmann confessed in the closing pages of *Public Opinion* that he had “written, and thrown away, several endings to this book.”² There would be no conclusion, no unraveling of mysteries, no final inventory of ideas. Instead, Lippmann wrapped up that

¹ Lippmann launched his “Today and Tomorrow” column on September 8, 1931.

² *Public Opinion*, 220.

book at the point he imagined “the polite reader has begun to look furtively at his watch.”³ When Lippmann wrote *The Phantom Public* (1925), he called it a sequel to *Public Opinion*, but it read more as the final chapter he neglected to write three years earlier. *The Phantom Public*, belatedly, carried the analysis in *Public Opinion* to its logical conclusion.⁴ In *Public Opinion*, he included a perfunctory plea to education, envisioning a new way of thinking to “bring our public opinion into grip with the environment.”⁵ *The Phantom Public*, however, was Lippmann’s “attempt to bring the theory of democracy into somewhat truer alignment with the nature of public opinion.”⁶

Lippmann’s views on public opinion during this period:

The public must be put in its place, so that it may exercise its own powers, but no less and perhaps more, so that each of us may live free of the trampling and the roar of a bewildered herd.⁷

Perhaps emboldened by the success of *Public Opinion*, Lippmann escalated the arguments advanced in that book during this period, expanding on points he had raised previously, and clarifying what he considered the legitimate boundaries of public opinion in modern society. In his postscript to that work, Lippmann assailed the sacred cow of democracy: majority rule, the active manifestation of public opinion.⁸ The ideal of the self-governing man was a cornerstone of democracy, but Lippmann thought majority rule

³ *Public Opinion*, 220.

⁴ Lippmann to Irene McNeal Swazey, April 6, 1925, WLP, reel 30.

⁵ A half-hearted attempt, coming after more than 200 pages in which he detailed the overwhelming obstacles impeding the formation of opinion. *Public Opinion*, 219.

⁶ Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (1925; repr., New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2009), 187.

⁷ *Phantom Public*, 145.

⁸ “The principle of majority rule has acquired an unction that protects it from criticism... (It) has been hallowed by an altogether adventitious sanctity due to an association of ideas with a religious hope of salvation.” Walter Lippmann, “Why Should the Majority Rule?,” *Harper’s Magazine*, March 1926, 399.

proved a weak foundation to build upon.⁹ Democratic theorists had imbued public opinion with mystical powers it could not summon; democratic reformers overlooked its inherent weaknesses in reverence to its origins. Lippmann would now address the corresponding damage the imperfect ideal had inflicted on popular government. “The notion that public opinion can and will decide all issues is in appearance very democratic,” he wrote. “In practice it undermines and destroys democratic government.”¹⁰ Lippmann acknowledged that his observations contradicted the orthodox theory of democracy. “That theory rests upon the assumption that there is a public which directs the course of events,” he wrote. “I hold that the public is a mere phantom. It is an abstraction.”¹¹ Having established he had no confidence in public opinion as a governing force, Lippmann set about dismantling arguments for its reform.

Reformers had long touted education as a panacea for the challenges facing democracy. “They have assumed that, even if the majority is not wise,” Lippmann wrote, “it is on the road to wisdom, and that with sufficient education the people would learn how to rule.”¹² But civic education could not keep pace with political and social changes; it was “bound always to be in arrears.”¹³ The public had not been properly outfitted to navigate the political landscape. “Nowhere,” Lippmann wrote during this period, “is the sovereign citizen of the future given a hint as to how, while he is earning a living, rearing

⁹ “Those who believed in democracy have always assumed that the majority should rule.” Lippmann, “Why Should the Majority Rule?,” 399.

¹⁰ Walter Lippmann, “Everybody’s Business and Nobody’s,” T&T, April 10, 1941.

¹¹ *Phantom Public*, 67.

¹² Lippmann, “Why Should the Majority Rule?,” 399.

¹³ *Phantom Public*, 17.

children and enjoying his life, he is to keep himself informed about the progress of this swarming confusion of problems.”¹⁴ If education were actually the supreme remedy – as Lippmann maintained it was in the final chapter of *Public Opinion* – then certainly it would have rectified the situation by now.¹⁵ “For education,” he noted in *The Phantom Public*, “has furnished the thesis of the last chapter of every optimistic book on democracy written for one hundred and fifty years.”¹⁶

Proposals aimed at strengthening democracy proceeded from the myth of the self-governing citizen. These proposals, Lippmann argued, inevitably overlooked the evidence that the public did not govern, could not act, and was only minimally interested in public affairs.¹⁷ The evidence suggested the democratic ideal was misconceived.

The only the effect of inviting everybody to judge every public question is to confuse everybody about everything. It is not in fact possible for all people to know all about all things, and the pretense that they can and that they do is a bad illusion. It is in the exact sense of the word not democracy but demagoguery. It rests on the idea that everyone has the time to study everything, and that is not true – on the idea that everyone is competent to judge everything, and that is not true.¹⁸

This was not a value judgment, Lippmann insisted, but rather a dispassionate analysis of a flawed theory.¹⁹ “I think it is a false ideal,” he wrote. “I do not mean an undesirable ideal. I mean an unattainable ideal, bad only in the sense that it is bad for a fat man to try to be a ballet dancer.”²⁰ The problem with conventional solutions to the enduring problems of democracy, according to Lippmann, was that those solutions

¹⁴ *Phantom Public*, 14.

¹⁵ *Public Opinion*, 219.

¹⁶ *Phantom Public*, 12.

¹⁷ “He reigns in theory but in fact he does not govern.” *Phantom Public*, 4.

¹⁸ Lippmann, “Everybody’s Business.”

¹⁹ “A century of experience compels us to deny this assumption.” *Phantom Public*, 69.

²⁰ *Phantom Public*, 29.

ultimately translated into additional burdens on an already overwhelmed public: namely more voting, more often, on more issues. To ask the public to perform *more* acts of democracy, Lippmann countered, was not only counterproductive it was counterintuitive.²¹ “He will not have a better public opinion because he is asked to express his opinion more often,” Lippmann wrote. “He will simply be more bewildered, more bored and more ready to follow along.”²² He maintained that the less asked of the public, the better. Despite the earnest efforts of various reformers, and in spite of the arguably misplaced confidence of democratic theorists, human nature, stubbornly, remained fixed – man had failed to realize the ideal of the sovereign, self-governing omniscient citizen. “The problems that vex democracy,” Lippmann explained, “seem to be unmanageable by democratic methods.”²³ Uncompromising fidelity to original democratic theory sabotaged the promise of a workable democracy.²⁴

In *Public Opinion*, Lippmann debunked the myth of the omniscient citizen; in *The Phantom Public*, he debunked the supposed virtue of majority rule.²⁵ He rejected the idea that majority rule was necessarily – or even arbitrarily – wise or moral; instead he considered it a perversion of public opinion.²⁶

²¹ “For what reason is there to think that subjecting so many more affairs to the method of the vote will reveal hitherto undiscovered wisdom and technical competence and reservoirs of public interest in men?” *Phantom Public*, 28.

²² *Phantom Public*, 27.

²³ *Phantom Public*, 179-180.

²⁴ “If democracy cannot direct affairs, then a philosophy which expects it to direct them will encourage people to attempt the impossible; they will fail.” *Phantom Public*, 145.

²⁵ “There is nothing in the teachings of Jesus or St. Francis which justifies us in thinking that the opinions of fifty-one percent of a group are better than the opinions of forty-nine percent.” Lippmann, “Why Should the Majority Rule?,” 399.

²⁶ Regarding the Scopes trial: “After this demonstration in Tennessee it was no longer possible to doubt that the dogma of majority rule contains within it some sort of deep and destructive confusion.” Lippmann, “Why Should the Majority Rule?,” 399.

I do not mean to cast even the slightest reflection on a union of men to promote their self-interest. It would be futile to do so, because we may take it as certain that men will act to benefit themselves whenever they think they conveniently can. A political theory based on the expectation of self-denial and sacrifice by the run of men in any community would not be worth considering.²⁷

The idealization of majority rule promoted the fiction that one could intuit a “homogenous will out of a heterogeneous mass of desires.”²⁸ Majority rule did not embody some intrinsic value anymore the outcome of an election – where less than half of the eligible voters cast ballots – expressed the popular will.²⁹ It was naïve, Lippmann wrote, to suggest that, somehow, “the compounding of individual ignorances in masses of people can produce a continuous directing force in public affairs.”³⁰ The false idol of majority rule was that the sum of individual opinions was not only greater but also infinitely wiser than its parts.

Citizens recognized they were neither sovereign nor omniscient. “Listening to speeches, uttering opinions and voting do not, he finds, enable him to govern,” Lippmann wrote.³¹ The public, he claimed, shared his skepticism of majority rule.³² “They have not believed whole-heartedly that democracy was safe for the world,” he wrote. “This unbelief is, I believe, an intuition that there is something lacking in the theory of democracy, that somewhere the doctrine of popular sovereignty as conceived

²⁷ *Phantom Public*, 101-102.

²⁸ *Phantom Public*, 38.

²⁹ “A vote is a promise of support. It is a way of saying: I am lined up with these men, on this side. I enlist with them. I will follow. I will buy. I will boycott. I will strike. I applaud. I jeer. The force I can exert is placed here, not there.” *Phantom Public*, 46-47.

³⁰ *Phantom Public*, 29.

³¹ “He lives in a world which he cannot see, does not understand and is unable to direct.” *Phantom Public*, 4.

³² “Most of us are for the people when we think the people are for us, and against them when they are not.” Walter Lippmann, “How can the People Rule?,” in *The Essential Lippmann*, 15.

by its apostles is inconsistent with essential facts of human experience.”³³ Lippmann cited prohibitive measures against alcohol, birth control, and certain books as examples of movements that circumvented the public will. Americans signaled their mistrust in the soundness of majority rule, he maintained, through attempts to subdue it, such as propaganda and special interest groups, and efforts to mitigate its risks, such as enacting voting restrictions. “The American faith in democracy has always been accompanied by efforts to limit the action of the democracy.”³⁴

Original democratic theory, Lippmann argued, was conceived at a time when debatable issues were confined to a man’s knowable environment. As the population grew and relocated from small villages to large cities, the governors of public affairs grew more remote from the governed. The Great Society, however, was not analogous to an oversized village and could not be managed by village virtues. As Lippmann wrote during World War II, “The methods of the town meeting will not regulate the affairs of a great republic which embraces a continent, which is defending a hemisphere, and is involved in one of the great crises of history.”³⁵ Government ruled in absentia; the notion that all men should have a voice in all affairs was no longer feasible.³⁶ “The widening distance between the centers where decisions are taken and the places where the main work of the world is done,” he explained, “has undermined the discipline of public opinion upon which earlier theorists relied.”³⁷

³³ Lippmann, “How can the People Rule?,” 15.

³⁴ Lippmann, “How can the People Rule?,” 14.

³⁵ Lippmann, “Everybody’s Business.”

³⁶ “They cannot take an interest in, they cannot make even the coarsest judgments about, and they will not act even in the most grossly partisan way on, all the questions arising daily in a complex and changing society.” *Phantom Public*, 115.

³⁷ *Phantom Public*, 171.

In his “Today and Tomorrow” column, Lippmann frequently addressed the problems raised as government grew increasingly responsive to an unreliable public opinion. During this period, he warned that government was facilitating its own undoing in ceding its authority to the public under the guise of majority rule. Reluctance to hazard going against public opinion rendered elected officials impotent: Government could not execute its duties “trying to make its decisions conform to the winds of opinion.”³⁸ As Lippmann explained, “Effective government cannot be conducted by legislators and officials who, when a question is presented, ask themselves first and last, not what is the truth and which is the right and necessary course but ‘what does the Gallup poll say?’ and ‘what does the fan mail say?’ and ‘how do the editors and commentators line up?’”³⁹ He suggested instead that government leaders evaluate their decisions “by consulting other responsible men.”⁴⁰ As for the public, it must be reminded that government officials were not elected “to perform errands for their constituents,” Lippmann wrote, “but to use their judgment freely, and freely to speak and act upon that judgment.”⁴¹ These views, however, were at odds with statements he made in *The Phantom Public* suggesting public officials were *not* beholden to public opinion.

Government, in the long intervals between elections, is carried on by politicians, officeholders and influential men who make settlements with other politicians, officeholders and influential men. Nor in any exact and literal sense are those who conduct the daily business of government accountable after the fact to the great mass of the voters.⁴²

³⁸ Walter Lippmann, “And Now Congress,” T&T, September 30, 1939.

³⁹ Lippmann, “Everybody’s Business.”

⁴⁰ Lippmann, “Everybody’s Business.”

⁴¹ Walter Lippmann, “The Ideal of Representative Government,” T&T, May 17, 1932.

⁴² *Phantom Public*, 31.

Neither of his contradictory takes, however, came close to the ideal of public action as Lippmann imagined it, one in which “the burden of carrying on the work of the world...lies not upon public opinion and not upon the government but on those who are responsibly concerned as agents in the affair.”⁴³

During this period, Lippmann revisited his theory of insiders versus outsiders. It was now better understood as agents versus bystanders: The ability to take action was the key distinction between the two groups. Agents were active participants in a specific event; everyone else was an outsider on that occasion. The role of agents and bystanders were not preordained. As issues changed and moved to the forefront, the groups were in constant flux; Tuesday’s agent could become Wednesday’s bystander. The mass public, however, was always a bystander. It could not take an active role in any circumstance. The public “can only reward or punish a result, accept or reject alternatives presented to them,” Lippmann explained. “They can say yes or no to something which has to be done, yes or no to a proposal.”⁴⁴ In aligning democratic theory with an attainable ideal of public opinion, he “conceived public opinion to be, not the voice of God, nor the voice of society, but the voice of the interested spectators of action.”⁴⁵ Perhaps to illustrate his point, Lippmann, who long ago rejected “the old democratic notion that any man can do almost any job,” now affirmed that he also rejected the aristocratic theory “that a sufficiently square peg will also fit a round hole.”⁴⁶ Both theories, he maintained, misunderstood the nature of competence. “Men are not good,” he wrote, “but good for

⁴³ *Phantom Public*, 63.

⁴⁴ *Phantom Public*, 42.

⁴⁵ *Phantom Public*, 187.

⁴⁶ *Drift and Mastery*, 15. *Phantom Public*, 140.

something.”⁴⁷ It was a misreading of his intent, Lippmann insisted, to view insiders and outsiders – or agents and bystanders – as “the masterful few and the ignorant many.”⁴⁸ Action was reserved for men solely by their investment in the outcome of an event. “Only insiders can make decisions,” he wrote, “not because he is inherently a better man but because he is so placed that he can understand and can act.”⁴⁹ Despite his insistence that this distinction was not a reflection on a man’s character, Lippmann, it seemed, could not help but follow that assertion with a statement that reeked of elitism, an accusation that had dogged him for years. “The outsider,” he continued, “is necessarily ignorant, usually irrelevant and often meddling, because he is trying to navigate the ship from dry land.”⁵⁰

To circumvent “ignorant meddling” by people who should by rights be bystanders, Lippmann proposed limiting public action by the criteria of two tests. “First. Is the rule defective? Second. How shall the agency be recognized which is most likely to mend it?” he wrote. “These are, I should maintain, the only two questions which the public needs to answer.”⁵¹ Outside of these parameters, action would rest exclusively with insiders. Lippmann’s proposal was a rejoinder to the notion that everyone should form an opinion on every issue. His theory, he explained, “economizes the attention of men as members of the public, and asks them to do as little as possible in matters where they can do nothing very well.”⁵²

⁴⁷ *Phantom Public*, 140.

⁴⁸ *Phantom Public*, 139.

⁴⁹ *Phantom Public*, 140.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ “They are the only questions which a member of the public can usefully concern himself with if he wished to avoid ignorant meddling.” *Phantom Public*, 98.

⁵² *Phantom Public*, 189.

Lippmann's views on the press during this period

“The theory of a free press is that the truth will emerge from free reporting and free discussion, not that it will be presented perfectly and instantly in any one account.”⁵³

As his newspaper career flourished, Lippmann frequently extolled the virtues of the press. In speaking on the issue to various organizations, he generally opened with some self-deprecating remark acknowledging his views about newspapers might lack objectivity; after all, he demurred, he was “merely a commentator on the news.”⁵⁴ Despite his professional experience, Lippmann was quick to point out that he was not an expert on the press. Such statements, he insisted, were no false modesty. “For heaven knows there is nothing modest about journalism as such,” he wrote, “least of all about the particular branch of it which I happen to practice.”⁵⁵ In the introduction to a speech he made in 1935, Lippmann compared attempting to cover a topic as broad as the press to the hazards of addressing a topic “as complex and as contentious” as “the ladies.”⁵⁶ What was true of some, he said, was not true of all, and, even then, not true of even some all of the time.

There are ladies by courtesy, by charity, by stretching the definition. The same might be said of some publications which call themselves newspapers. I shall not pursue the analogy into all its possible ramifications, except to suggest that it is possible to believe in the importance of the press without liking or reading every newspaper just as it is possible to believe in women without loving or wishing to marry each and every one of them.⁵⁷

⁵³ Walter Lippmann, “Notes on the Freedom of the Press,” T&T April 25, 1936.

⁵⁴ The real work, he insisted, was news reporting. Walter Lippmann, “The Press,” *Vital Speeches of the Day* 1, no. 12 (February 22, 1935), 363.

⁵⁵ Walter Lippmann, “Two Revolutions in the American Press,” *Yale Review* 20, no. 3 (March 1931): 434.

⁵⁶ “Surely, if men can speak on a subject which is as complex and as contentious as that, with only hearsay and partial knowledge and a limited experience to inform them, a writer for the newspapers may venture to speak about the press.” *Vital Speeches*, 362.

⁵⁷ *Vital Speeches*, 362.

That statement provides a good overview of Lippmann's views on the press during this period. No longer did he consider it irredeemably flawed, as he had in *Public Opinion*. The press, he conceded, may not be perfect, but it was "by and large the most informative in the world."⁵⁸ Of course, he was one of those journalists whose work reflected that.

This period begins just as Lippmann was establishing what would prove to be a long, successful career in newspapers. He made little mention of the press in *The Phantom Public*, aside from dismissively referring to the public as "commuters reading headlines" or "busy men reading newspapers for half an hour or so a day," the implication being that "a reader of newspapers" was not well informed.⁵⁹ This view, however, was more of a reflection on the public than it was of the press, as Lippmann repeatedly stated he considered thirty minutes a day insufficient for staying abreast of public affairs. His only other mention of the press in *The Phantom Public* was in likening the public to a "deaf spectator" who could find no relief for his bewildered state, in part, because "no newspaper reports his environment so that he can grasp it."⁶⁰ Again, this was not an explicit criticism of the press. Even if the press rigorously reported every detail of every event, the reader, as Lippmann detailed in *Public Opinion*, would not necessarily comprehend the news accurately. (This was assuming, of course, the reader was interested enough to read the news in the first place.) *The Phantom Public* was published after Lippmann officially took over the editorial page at the *New York World*; therefore, if

⁵⁸ Lippmann, "How can the People Rule?," 15.

⁵⁹ *Phantom Public*, 62-63, 109.

⁶⁰ *Phantom Public*, 3-4.

his views on the press in that book seem ambiguous, it is perhaps worth noting that he completed the manuscript in the summer of 1923. As this period opened, his confidence in the press was soaring,

In a speech before the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 1925, Lippmann recounted arguing with a graduate student who suggested newspapers deliberately misinformed voters. When the student asserted that newspapers had a responsibility to report on every act of government, Lippmann moved in for the kill:

Did it ever occur to you that there are several hundred thousand government employees, more Departments, Bureaus and Commissions than you can shake a stick at, not to mention forty-eight states, 3,000 countries, no end of cities, at least 50 diplomatic missions, and that official acts are performed in all of them for several hours every day? Now assume that every one of these acts is reported to you every day in a newspaper, this ideal newspaper you seem to desire, which would be as thick as a telephone book and about as fascinating. Imagine yourself confronted with that newspaper. Would you read it for thirty minutes a day, for an hour, including the cross-word puzzle?⁶¹

The notion that the press could and should exhaustively report each stirring of government activity failed to appreciate the realities of newsgathering, as well as the public's appetite for such news. "This enormous indifference is reflected in the success of newspapers which make no pretense of dealing with public affairs," Lippmann said. "It is reflected in the apparent loss of influence by the editorial page."⁶² In the absence of industry standards dictating news selection and emphasis, editors and reporters relied on personal discretion to interpret events.⁶³ As the press was "obstructed by an almost impenetrable censorship in all the critical quarters of the world," this journalistic license

⁶¹ Walter Lippmann, "Public Opinion" (address to the American Society of Newspaper Editors, 1925), 145.

⁶² Lippmann, address to ASNE, 146.

⁶³ "Editors, orators, writers do their best to discern the significance of facts which happen to be available to them." Lippmann, "The President," T&T, April 19, 1941.

allowed reporters to paint a picture from the available information.⁶⁴ The news, Lippmann explained, was a work of art, not a mirror to the world.⁶⁵ Still, he would argue, “the newspapers do their honest and courageous best to report the facts.”⁶⁶

Lippmann’s favorable view of the press coincided with his joining the staff of a daily newspaper.⁶⁷ Even though he had long worked in journalism, prior to this period Lippmann had criticized the press primarily as an outsider, his disdain directed at daily newspapers, particularly the *New York Times*.⁶⁸ Now, as an insider among journalists, Lippmann rarely criticized the mainstream press.⁶⁹ He disagreed with the Hutchins committee recommendation that the press should engage in mutual criticism.⁷⁰ “Mutual criticism, like marital criticism, if it is publicly made, is too hard for mortal man to take,” Lippmann wrote. “The good critic should be an outsider.”⁷¹

⁶⁴ The press had no recourse except to make “partial judgments on insufficient evidence.” Lippmann, “The President.”

⁶⁵ Lippmann, address to ASNE, 145.

⁶⁶ Lippmann, “The President.”

⁶⁷ “Two Revolutions” was written the same year Lippmann joined the *Herald Tribune*.

⁶⁸ In a review of *Liberty and the News*, the *NYT* pushed back against his criticisms of the press, dismissing Lippmann as someone with little understanding of newspaper work.

⁶⁹ “I had fallen into the vulgar prejudice of assuming that only the performer can understand his art, whereas it is often the case that the critic understands the play better than the actor. For while the performer’s own account of his art is entitled to respect and consideration, it has no intrinsic authority and it is open to heavy discount in the light of our human propensity to justify our own actions in the past and our hopes in the future.” Lippmann, “Two Revolutions,” 433-434.

⁷⁰ The Hutchins committee, also known as The Commission on Freedom of the Press, was formed in 1943 and tasked with reporting on the state of American press. The committee issued a report in 1947 detailing its findings and suggesting reforms to improve the press. Commission on Freedom of the Press, *A Free and Responsible Press* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947), 94.

⁷¹ “While vigorous criticism of the press is most necessary to the welfare of the press, it will have to come from those who are outside the press.” Walter Lippmann, “How is the Press To Be Criticized?,” (July 1947), repr., *Nieman Reports* 53/54, no. 4/1 (Winter 1999 – Spring 2000).

There are few current concerns of mankind on which my colleagues and I do not have something to say; yet the newspaper itself, which is our medium, almost certainly imposes unrealized presumptions, loyalties, and interests, and reservations, upon any newspaper man's discussion of his own craft. The last word, therefore, must lie with the detached student, who can by imagination and sympathy and observation know all that we know without our entanglements.⁷²

While his outlook, in general, was positive, there was one subset of the press that held few charms for Lippmann: the tabloids. Yellow journalism, he frequently pointed out, undermined the progress and besmirched the reputation of the legitimate press. But Lippmann predicted that the tabloids would not endure: Much like the muckrakers during the progressive era, yellow journalism would exhaust itself in the pursuit of sensationalism and novelty.⁷³ "They will experiment," he wrote, "until at last they bring down upon themselves the wrath of the established community."⁷⁴ Mature readers, Lippmann maintained, valued reliable news. He saw this period as the dawning of a new age in news reporting: Educated readers and conscientious journalists, initially spurred by revulsion "at the orgy of lying which the war propaganda let loose," had launched a revolution in journalism.⁷⁵ This new journalism, he wrote, already was overtaking the tabloids, demonstrating "that the objective, orderly, and comprehensive presentation of news is a far more successful type of journalism to-day than the dramatic, disorderly, episodic type."⁷⁶

⁷² Lippmann, "Two Revolutions," 434.

⁷³ "When everything is dramatic, nothing after a while is dramatic," he wrote. "When everything is highly spiced, nothing after a while has much flavor; when everything is new and startling, the human mind just ceases to be startled." Lippmann, "Two Revolutions," 438.

⁷⁴ Lippmann, "Battle Over Censorship," 102.

⁷⁵ "The most impressive event of the last decade in the history of newspapers." Lippmann, "Two Revolutions," 439.

⁷⁶ Lippmann, "Two Revolutions," 439.

When Lippmann wrote that the American press was the freest of any nation, owing to the widespread popular support it enjoyed, he credited an unlikely source for helping to advance that freedom – the tabloids. “This is the great service performed by what I have called the popular commercial press, otherwise known as yellow journalism, and in its latest and perhaps last manifestation as tabloid journalism,” he wrote. “It is the first politically independent press which the world has known.”⁷⁷ Lippmann did, however, go on to clarify that rather than being truly free, the popular press was more akin to “a kind of freedmen’s press.”⁷⁸ Having traded one type of external control for another, the press, free of government authority, was now indebted to its audience.⁷⁹ To escape this condition, the press must make independence its highest goal; only then could it secure a lasting freedom. Lippmann noted that freedom of the press and independence of the press were secured by distinct sources, and while the two concepts were complementary, they should not be conflated. Freedom of the press was granted by the Constitution; independence was an achievement of the press.⁸⁰ But independence was a relatively new condition, and Lippmann felt the battle to secure its legal rights was ongoing. “It will be won if it is won at all,” he wrote, “by newspaper men whose highest ambition in their profession is to get the news and state it correctly and print it fearlessly.”⁸¹

It is perfectly possible to have a press which is legally free but it is not independent because it is the mouthpiece of parties, interests, cults. And experience shows, I believe, that unless among the newspapers of a country there

⁷⁷ Lippmann, “Two Revolutions,” 437.

⁷⁸ Lippmann, “Two Revolutions,” 436 - 437.

⁷⁹ “Thus this press, escaped from the tutelage of government, fell under the tutelage of the masses.” Lippmann, “Two Revolutions,” 436.

⁸⁰ Lippmann, “Notes on the Freedom of the Press.”

⁸¹ *Vital Speeches*, 363.

are established newspapers of wide circulation which are predominantly independent, which are predominantly objective, which are predominantly disinterested in the presentation of news, the legal freedom of the press has no solid and enduring foundations.⁸²

In a departure from his previous view that newspapers had assumed the role once occupied by wartime censors, Lippmann now maintained that insiders exercised censorship as a means to “protect” outsiders from “subversive ideas.” He framed censorship as a conflict, simultaneously, of authority versus liberty, conservative versus liberal, and elites versus everyone else.⁸³ In this iteration, insiders were members of the “privileged” class, men who enjoyed “amazing freedom of opinion,” the same men who supported denying that freedom to “unadjusted” outsiders.⁸⁴ It was no coincidence, Lippmann asserted, that the degree of media regulation corresponded with the perceived intelligence and social class of its target audience.⁸⁵ In general, print media was less regulated than visual media; mainstream newspapers and magazines were subject to less censorship than movies or the theater.⁸⁶ Again, the tabloids were the exception. Despite being “consciously adapted to a low and hurried intelligence,” yellow journalism

⁸² *Vital Speeches*, 363.

⁸³ “They are the reserves of conservatism from which are mobilized the legions of defense against the irregular forces of the outsiders.” “Battle Over Censorship,” 104-106.

⁸⁴ Lippmann, “Battle Over Censorship,” 104.

⁸⁵ It was “applied in proportion to the vividness, the directness, and the intelligibility of the medium which circulates the subversive idea.” Lippmann noted that movies were more heavily regulated than the theater, which attracted an older, wealthier, and more sophisticated crowd. Movies, the most popular commercial medium, attracted an audience of “the lowest and the most immature intelligence.” Lippmann, “Battle Over Censorship,” 100. The first talking moving picture premiered October 6, 1927.

⁸⁶ “Men are much less moved by what they read than by what they see, and literacy is a recent and uncertain accomplishment of the human race. The proprietors of the tabloids found this out a few years ago and it has been a very profitable discovery.” Lippmann, “Battle Over Censorship,” 101.

benefitted from a type of herd immunity against censorship.⁸⁷ “Nevertheless,” Lippmann wrote, “they are suspect because, like the moving picture, they reach the suspect classes.”⁸⁸ Suppression, he noted, was aimed almost exclusively toward the young, the poor, and other impressionable persons the insiders feared were susceptible to being “seduced by agitators.”⁸⁹ “It is not the idea as such which the censor attacks, whether it be heresy or radicalism or obscenity,” Lippmann wrote. “He attacks the circulation of the idea among the classes which in his judgment are not to be trusted with the idea.”⁹⁰ For all the obvious occupational hazards, Lippmann observed, the censor managed to perform his duties and yet somehow escaped with his morals intact.

The censor exposes himself daily to every corrupting influence. They may in their unconscious minds come to doubt God, insult the flag, and despise chastity. But whatever the private consequences may be, outwardly the censors remain doubly convinced of the sanctity of the institution they are protecting.⁹¹

Despite his criticism of the arbitrary enforcement of censorship and the aura of elitism surrounding suppression, Lippmann never suggested freedom of opinion should be absolute. He insisted this view put him in good company: All theories of liberty, he wrote, were related “to the specific needs of the man who preaches it.”⁹² His argument against absolute freedom of expression echoed his analysis of opinion formation in *Public Opinion*.

⁸⁷ Tabloids provided “vicarious satisfaction.” Lippmann, “Battle Over Censorship,” 101.

⁸⁸ Lippmann, “Battle Over Censorship,” 102.

⁸⁹ “They are not unconsciously loyal, and their impressions have to be controlled by the insiders who are intuitively right-minded.” Lippmann, “Battle Over Censorship,” 104.

⁹⁰ Lippmann, “Battle Over Censorship,” 98.

⁹¹ Lippmann, “Battle Over Censorship,” 98-99.

⁹² Lippmann, “Battle Over Censorship,” 95.

The doctrinaires of liberty base their theory on the assumption that almost all men have the ability to weigh evidence and choose reasonably. Whether almost all men have the ability or not, they certainly do not use it. They are governed by their interests as they conceive them by consulting their feelings about them. The men who ever reach a conclusion which is contrary to their bias and their convenience are too few to make any important difference in the course of events.⁹³

Lippmann argued in *Liberty and the News* that untrue opinion should not enjoy protection under the First Amendment, a stance he maintained during this period. He did, however, offer a small concession to accommodate a more generous freedom of expression than he had previously endorsed: In exchange for tolerance, freedom of opinion should demand engagement. Opinion must be subject to confrontation. Lippmann considered debate an essential element of free speech, as confrontation was the likeliest method for uncovering the truth.⁹⁴ “This is the virtue of liberty,” he wrote, “and the ground on which we may best justify our belief in it, that it tolerates error in order to serve the truth.”⁹⁵ Because he still had little faith that the truth would spontaneously prevail in the marketplace of ideas, he remained amenable to regulating the speech of those of “who cannot or will not permit or maintain debate when it does not suit their purposes.”⁹⁶ In contrast to his condemnation of censorship based on privilege, Lippmann sanctioned the regulation of media according to its ability to facilitate debate, although he neglected to acknowledge that his own approach – ranking media across a spectrum of justifiable regulation – corresponded precisely with the elitist media censorship

⁹³ Lippmann, “Battle Over Censorship,” 105.

⁹⁴ In facilitating confrontation, debate would reveal, if not the truth, then “the partisan and the advocate.” *Phantom Public*, 104.

⁹⁵ Walter Lippmann, “The Indispensable Opposition,” *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1939, 186.

⁹⁶ “Indispensable Opposition,” 186.

hierarchy.⁹⁷ Newspapers came out on top using his measure as well.⁹⁸ “The opportunity for debate is so considerable that discontent cannot grow to the point where under normal conditions there is any disposition to regulate the press,” Lippmann wrote, before issuing this caveat: “But when newspapers abuse their power by injuring people who have no means of replying, a disposition to regulate the press appears.”⁹⁹

Lippmann was vocal in his criticism of what he considered the press’s intrusion into private matters. He was adamant that liberty of the press should not trump an individual’s right to privacy. “The First Amendment forbids Congress to make laws abridging the freedom of the press,” he wrote, “but it does not guarantee to the press any other privilege or immunities which all citizens do not enjoy.” The press had an obligation to exercise its rights responsibly; freedom, he warned, was precarious when it infringed upon the liberty of others. “Thus a journalist who respects his own liberties will respect the liberties of others,” he wrote, “knowing that on any other terms his freedom will become a tyranny to his fellow men.”¹⁰⁰ Lippmann felt that the press “grossly abused” the privacy of private and public individuals, creating an atmosphere where personal matters were exploited, commercialized and politicized “as a spectacle for the mob.”¹⁰¹ Citizens, he wrote, deserved protection, which he called “freedom from the

⁹⁷ Lippmann noted that the relationship between regulation and ability to foster debate extended beyond the press. The size of the U. S. House of Representatives hindered robust debate, therefore its rules limited debate. The structure of the Senate, however, was conducive to debate and its members enjoyed “almost absolute freedom of speech.” Lippmann, “Indispensible Opposition,” 186.

⁹⁸ As a medium, movies were not suited to debate. The radio format offered no guarantee an audience would hear both sides of a debate, and thus was subject to a degree of regulation. Lippmann, “Indispensible Opposition,” 232.

⁹⁹ Lippmann, “Indispensible Opposition,” 232.

¹⁰⁰ Walter Lippmann, “The Departure of the Lindberghs,” T&T, December 28, 1935.

¹⁰¹ Lippmann, “Departure of the Lindberghs.”

press.”¹⁰² Lippmann argued that conventional remedies such as libel laws and editorial corrections did little to dissuade such intrusions. “Here,” he wrote, “press can print almost anything about anybody subject only to an extremely cumbersome, expensive, and embarrassing procedure for libel.”¹⁰³ The attitude of the press and the public must change.¹⁰⁴ Citizens must reject tawdry, sensational reporting and the legitimate “honest” press must crowd the marketplace with superior, ethical journalism in order “to make it dangerously unprofitable to prostitute the liberties of the press.”¹⁰⁵ Only economic sanctions would deter the yellow press.

The press must protect liberties for all to ensure its own freedoms, including “the capacity of all men to defend their rights before independent tribunals.”¹⁰⁶ In the court of public opinion, men were “almost without protection against publicity.”¹⁰⁷ Publishers – here, Lippmann singled out Hearst – could subject almost anyone “to any kind of torture and indignity and they have no recourse. They cannot answer him effectively. They cannot hold him to account.”¹⁰⁸ This was a common complaint of government officials against the press. “(Politicians) have raised again the everlasting question of whether criticism is fair criticism,” Lippmann wrote, “whether unfavorable news reports are

¹⁰² Lippmann to Robert M. Hutchins, no date, WLP.

¹⁰³ Walter Lippmann, “The Case at Ipswich Assizes,” T&T, October 29, 1936.

¹⁰⁴ “What with those who wish to be in the limelight at any cost, those who are afraid to stand up for rights, and those who have an infantile curiosity to learn the inside story of the inside story of the facts of life, there has gone out of the public taste a capacity to realize and to resent the treatment of personal lives as a spectacle for the mob.”

Lippmann, “Departure of the Lindberghs.”

¹⁰⁵ Lippmann, “Departure of the Lindberghs.”

¹⁰⁶ “What are the rights of individuals as against unreasonable searches and seizures by the press in the field of their reputations and their private lives?” Lippmann, “Notes on the Freedom of the Press,”

¹⁰⁷ Lippmann referred to press as “all who control publicity.” “Case at Ipswich.”

¹⁰⁸ Lippmann, “Case at Ipswich.”

impartial news reports.”¹⁰⁹ He suggested politicians’ charges of press bias would be taken more seriously if they ever suggested it at times when they received too much praise.¹¹⁰ *New York Times* columnist James Reston recalled that policy makers did not consider Lippmann unfair, but still, “while they respect his experience, and admire his style and clarity, they are constantly complaining, as one of them remarked, that ‘he is often clearer than the truth.’”¹¹¹ Because the goals of the press and political leaders were often at odds, friendships between the two were “invariably delicate and difficult” – and, according to Lippmann, inevitable.¹¹² The President, his administration and congressmen “have the means for informing themselves on the realities” of events, issues and policies, he wrote, “that no one else, not even the most conscientious newspaper reporter, can possess.”¹¹³

For obviously they must be close: correspondents must see much of the men they write about. Yet if they do, they soon find themselves compelled to choose between friendship and the ties of loyalty that come from companionship on the one hand, the stern truth on the other. This is the unpleasant side of newspaper work and I have never heard of any way of avoiding it. When a personal friend becomes a public man, a predicament soon arrives in which friendship and professional duty are at odds.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹ Lippmann acknowledged that it was “only human for officials to feel that unfavorable news and critical comment is biased, incompetent, and misleading. There is no denying the sincerity of their complaints and there is no use pretending that any newspaperman can regularly give the whole objective truth about all complicated and controverted questions.” Lippmann, “Notes on the Freedom of the Press.”

¹¹⁰ “In the heat of a political battle very few can ever believe that their opponents are as honest as their supporters.” Ibid.

¹¹¹ Reston, “Mockingbird and the Taxicab,” 235

¹¹² Lippmann, “Notes on the Freedom of the Press.”

¹¹³ Lippmann, “Everybody’s Business.”

¹¹⁴ President Coolidge was the rare politician who successfully navigated this problem. “He achieved this miracle by conveying the general impression that he had never heard of the newspaper with which his guest was connected, and had never had anything printed in it called to his attention.” Lippmann, “Notes on the Freedom of the Press.”

Lippmann held the public relations profession in low regard, particularly government publicity bureaus which he described as “disliked” and, more pointedly, “distrusted.”¹¹⁵ He found the invasion of public affairs by public relations experts galling, especially when it invaded the Oval Office.¹¹⁶ “I call this conception of publicity inherently insincere,” he wrote, “because it assumes that the public aspect of a person can be fabricated by men who have specialized in the art of manipulating public opinion.”¹¹⁷ Despite his recommendations to limit the role of public opinion in public affairs, Lippmann still believed government had a responsibility to inform the public of its decisions. He considered publicity professionals writing speeches for government officials a duplicitous practice, particularly when it involved presidential addresses. Assistance, he insisted, should be provided solely by advisers rather than being outsourced to “ghost writers lacking first hand knowledge of, and perhaps responsibility for, the things they helped the President put into words.”¹¹⁸ The public, Lippmann warned, readily sensed phoniness from politicians; an air of insincerity eroded the public’s confidence in its leaders. “No one can write an authentic speech for another man,” he argued. “It is as impossible as writing his love letters for him or saying his prayers for him.”¹¹⁹

For it is much more important that he could be genuine, and it is infinitely more persuasive, than that he could be bright, clever, ingenious, entertaining, eloquent, or even grammatical. It is, moreover, a delusion, fostered into an inferiority complex among executives by professional

¹¹⁵ Public relations, he wrote, was typical of other “shoddy” things “that flourished in that interval between the two wars.” Walter Lippmann, “Something Off My Chest,” T&T, March 14, 1942.

¹¹⁶ Lippmann, “Something Off My Chest.”

¹¹⁷ Lippmann, “Something Off My Chest.”

¹¹⁸ Lippmann, “Something Off My Chest.”

¹¹⁹ Lippmann, “Something Off My Chest.”

writers, that in an age of specialists some are called to act and some are called to find the right words for men of action to use. The truth is that anyone who knows what he is doing can say what he is doing, and anyone who knows what he thinks can say what he thinks. Those who cannot speak for themselves are, with very rare exceptions, not very sure of what they are doing and of what they mean. The sooner they are found out the better.¹²⁰

Lippmann knew what *he* thought. Having little faith in the capacity of the public to form well-reasoned opinions, he used his platform as the country's most distinguished political columnist to influence his vast readership. His views carried great weight with policy makers as well. Coincidentally, perhaps, his estimation of the press rose dramatically during this period. The final chapter of his career would be equally dramatic: Lippmann, who we first encountered as an idealistic progressive boy wonder, will transition into a nostalgic conservative elder statesman of the press.

¹²⁰ Lippmann, "Something Off My Chest."

PART II; CHAPTER FIVE
1952-1971

Where mass opinion dominates the government, there is a morbid derangement of the true functions of power.

– Walter Lippmann, *Essays in the Public Philosophy*

Walter Lippmann was a remarkably prolific journalist and author. He enjoyed a singularly impressive career as a syndicated columnist and a political philosopher. As he embarked on the final period of his career, Lippmann showed no signs of slowing down in either regard. Nor did he turn away from the issues of the press and public opinion he had puzzled over for so long. Amid the upheaval of the Korean conflict and the Vietnam War, the spectacle of the Army-McCarthy hearings, and the turbulence of the civil rights era, Lippmann advocated a return to the democratic ideals of the Founding Fathers.

Just as the theories he debuted in *Public Opinion* distanced him from his pre-war ideals, Lippmann now retreated from many of the views he expressed in that classic work. He had always been conflicted, to some extent, about the proper role consent of the governed should play in a government by consent. Having grown alarmed at the “enfeebling” effect of public opinion on the executive and legislative branches, Lippmann insisted during this period that public opinion should have no voice in crucial government decisions. Having reached the pinnacle of his career, a summit of consummate establishment respectability in which he was almost an institution unto himself, he now thought the press had come close to achieving the democratic ideal. In fact, all of his hope for democracy was vested in the press, or, more exactly, newspapers.

In some ways, this final period was one of rejuvenation for Lippmann. In his seventies, the dean of American journalism joined a new news outlet, debuted on a new medium and won over a new audience. At the age of 74, after 32 years at the *New York Herald Tribune*, Lippmann moved his syndicated “Today and Tomorrow” column to the *Washington Post* on January 1, 1963. He wrote the first of his bi-weekly articles for *Newsweek* magazine that same month.¹ Between July 7, 1960 and February 22, 1965, Lippmann took part in a series of seven highly rated appearances on CBS Reports. He published three books on foreign affairs and *Essays in the Public Philosophy* (1955), a book about natural law and democracy. An elder statesman of the press, Lippmann was feted, his work celebrated, throughout these last years.² He won two special category Pulitzer Prizes: in 1958, for Editorial Comment; and in 1962, for Distinguished Reporting on International Affairs. In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson bestowed upon Lippmann the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation’s highest civilian honor.

In his farewell “Today and Tomorrow” column, which ran on May 25, 1967, Lippmann wrote that he was ready to say goodbye to “the necessity of knowing, day in and day out, what the blood pressure is at the White House and who said what and who saw whom and who is listened to and who is not listened to.”³ Lippmann died at a nursing home on Park Avenue in New York on December 14, 1974. He was 85 years old. He left behind an unfinished book he had started writing a few years earlier; it’s subject, the ungovernability of man.

¹ Lippmann’s final article for *Newsweek* was published January 11, 1971.

² Steel writes that Lippmann was considered “one of the shining ornaments of the Kennedy administration...he enjoyed a participation and an influence he had not known since his World War I days with Newton Baker and Colonel House.” Steel, 524.

³ Walter Lippmann, “Personal Explanation,” T&T, May 25, 1967.

Throughout his career, Lippmann was always contemplating the ungovernability of man and other inherent difficulties of the democratic system. He announced in his June 18, 1951 “Today and Tomorrow” column he was taking a leave from his duties at the *New York Herald Tribune* to ponder the “perennial issues of the human condition.”⁴ Lippmann explained he needed a fresh perspective as he resumed work on a book he first started in 1938. “I have now been writing these articles on current events for twenty years, and... anyone who has been that long in the boiler room of the ship had better come up on deck for a breath of fresh air and a look at the horizon,” he wrote.⁵ That book, *Essays in the Public Philosophy*, revealed his gloomy view of democracy: The enormous influence of public opinion over government had triggered the “catastrophic decline of Western society.”⁶ In order to halt that decline, he wrote, it would be necessary to restore “the public philosophy of civility,” based on natural law.

Except on the premise of this philosophy, it is impossible to reach intelligible and workable conceptions of popular election, majority rule, representative assemblies, free speech, loyalty, property, corporations and voluntary associations. The founders of these institutions, which the recently enfranchised democracies have inherited, were all of them adherents of some one of the various schools of natural law.⁷

In this final period of the evolution of Lippmann’s views on the press and public opinion, the progressive idealist morphed into a nostalgic traditionalist.

⁴ Walter Lippmann, “Total War and Coexistence, I,” T&T, June 18, 1951.

⁵ “So I have gone off to the country, leaving unanswered the editor’s question – which was whether, the times being so critical, it is right to turn away even for a few months from the news of the day to certain of the perennial issues of the human condition.” Lippmann, “Total War and Coexistence, I.”

⁶ Walter Lippmann, *Essays in the Public Philosophy* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1955), 15.

⁷ Lippmann, *Essays*, 101.

Charges that he had abandoned liberalism and adopted anti-democratic views were the two most frequent and consistent criticisms leveled at Lippmann.⁸ He addressed both accusations early on in *Essays in the Public Philosophy*. “Perhaps, before going any further, I should say that I am a liberal democrat and have no wish to disenfranchise my fellow citizens,” Lippmann wrote. “My hope is that both liberty and democracy can be preserved before the one destroys the other.”⁹ The book was not well received by his peers. Even as his career was being celebrated, he encountered opposition for his views. After that, although he continued to write critically about the state of public affairs, he softened his tone considerably, as he did in 1960, when Lippmann reaffirmed his confidence in American democracy in an article for *Life* magazine.¹¹ “The ultimate ends are fixed,” he declared. “They are lasting and they are not disputed. The nation is dedicated to freedom. It is dedicated to the rights of man and to government with the consent of the governed.”¹²

Lippmann’s views on public opinion during this period

“No more than the kings before them should the people be hedged with divinity.”¹³

Lippmann’s views on public opinion during this period exposed the conflicts in his thinking as he attempted to reconcile his idealistic hopes for democracy with his

⁸ Starting in the 1930s when he joined the conservative *New York Herald Tribune*.

⁹ Lippmann, *Essays*, 13.

¹¹ When asked if democracy was outdated, Lippmann replied, “No, I don’t think so...I am not a pessimist about this problem, although I’ve written quite a lot about the faults of democracy.” The Columbia Broadcasting System, *Conversations with Walter Lippmann* (Boston: Little, Brown) August 11, 1960 interview with Howard K. Smith, 15.

¹² Walter Lippmann, “The Country is Waiting for Another Innovator,” *Life*, June 20, 1960, 114.

¹³ Lippmann, *Essays*, 13 – 14.

pragmatic assessment of contemporary society. Although at heart he was a champion of democracy, Lippmann was never comfortable with the public's role in public affairs. In *Public Opinion* and *The Phantom Public*, he challenged two foundations of democratic theory – the ideals of the sovereign citizen and majority rule – yet in 1952 he conceded the democratic experiment had thus far been successful. “There has as yet been no other country in the history of the world,” Lippmann wrote, “where so many people, so diverse in their origins and in their interests, have on so vast a territory governed themselves so long and preserved their freedom.”¹⁴ Still, his writing during this period was filled with contradictory statements as Lippmann continued wrestling with the dilemmas of democracy. Try as he did – at times – to project a democratically optimistic viewpoint, his growing concerns about public opinion reached full bloom. “There is no public criterion of the true and the false, of the right and the wrong,” he wrote, “beyond that which a preponderant mass of voters, consumers, readers and listeners happen at the moment to be supposed to want.”¹⁵ In his view, the effect of public opinion on public affairs was dangerously out of kilter.

There has developed in this century a functional derangement of the relationship between the mass of people and the government. The people have acquired power which they are incapable of exercising, and the governments they elect have lost powers which they must recover if they are to govern.¹⁶

Lippmann's writing danced between various positions throughout this period, choreographed by the movement of events. His “Today and Tomorrow” columns, being topical, tended to convey a more optimistic outlook than his books, which took a more

¹⁴ Walter Lippmann, “The Election Explained,” T&T, November 3, 1952.

¹⁵ Lippmann, *Essays*, 114.

¹⁶ Lippmann, *Essays*, 14.

contemplative view of the issues. For example, although Lippmann wrote in his syndicated newspaper column that the electoral process was an “enormous virtue” of the system, he questioned those virtues in *Essays in the Public Philosophy*.¹⁷ Elected officials, at the mercy of the voters, “have no sure tenure,” he wrote. “They are in effect perpetual office seekers, always on trial for their political lives.”¹⁸ The public, he explained, held latent veto power over politicians; politicians, therefore, were moved more by opinion polls than the public interest.¹⁹ Lippmann warned that democracy was vulnerable when politicians lacked the courage to go against ill-informed public opinion and exercise their best judgment.²⁰ He clarified the distinction between public opinion and the public interest. “The public interest may be presumed to be what men would choose if they saw clearly, thought rationally, acted disinterestedly and benevolently.”²¹

This, however, was not the case, as Lippmann revealed in *Public Opinion: Voters* were self-centered and self-interested.²² “In ordinary circumstances voters cannot be expected to transcend their particular, localized and self-regarding opinions,” he wrote. “In their circumstances, which as private persons they cannot readily surmount, the voters are most likely to suppose that whatever seems obviously good to them must be good for

¹⁷ “We have developed out of our experience a process by which the conflicts and diversities of sections, of classes and sects are assuaged and mollified, are purged and cooled, so that the nation can live with them and the government be carried on.”

Lippmann, “The Election Explained.”

¹⁸ Lippmann, *Essays*, 26.

¹⁹ Lippmann, *Essays*, 49.

²⁰ Lippmann, *Essays*, 18.

²¹ Lippmann, *Essays*, 42.

²² “The People, as an aggregate of voters, have diverse, conflicting self-centered interests and opinions. A plurality of them cannot be counted upon to represent the corporate nation.” Lippmann, *Essays*, 38.

the country, and good in the sight of God.”²³ Any claim that the interests of a prevailing plurality of the voters approximated the public interest was misguided.²⁴ “The crucial problem of modern democracy,” Lippmann wrote, “arises from the fact that this assumption is false.”²⁵ He also called into question the validity of opinion polls, echoing his view, from the first period of the evolution of his views, that mass opinion did not reveal mass wisdom.²⁶ “The Gallup polls are reports of what people are thinking,” he wrote. “But that a plurality of the people sampled in the poll think one way has no bearing upon whether it is sound public policy...the statistical sum of their opinions is not the final verdict on an issue. It is, rather, the beginning of the argument.”²⁷

The negative affect of public opinion on public policy was exacerbated when passions were inflamed, particularly during times of war.

When public opinion has been inattentive or not vehemently aroused, responsible officials have often been able to circumvent extremist popular opinions and to wheedle their way towards moderation and good sense. In the crises, however, democratic officials – over and above their own propensity to err – have been compelled to make the big mistakes that public opinion has insisted upon. Even the greatest men have not been able to turn back the massive tides of opinion and sentiment.²⁸

²³ Lippmann, *Essays*, 41.

²⁴ Lippmann, *Essays*, 34.

²⁵ Lippmann, *Essays*, 32.

²⁶ “Our experience with mass elections in the twentieth century compels us, I think, to the contrary conclusion: that public opinion becomes less realistic as the mass to whom information must be conveyed, and arguments must be addressed, grows larger and more heterogeneous.” Lippmann, *Essays*, 39.

²⁷ Lippmann, *Essays*, 41-42.

²⁸ Lippmann, *Essays*, 24.

The same “paroxysms of hatred” necessary to rally public support for war also served as an obstacle to public acceptance of the compromises necessary for peace negotiations.²⁹ Lippmann insisted the public share the blame for the “grave errors” the country committed in the name of war and peace.³⁰ “We must adopt the habit of thinking as plainly about the sovereign people as we do about the politicians they elect,” he wrote. “It will not do to think poorly of the politicians and to talk with bated breath about the voters.”³¹

The public had neither the experience nor the knowledge to weigh in on strategic and diplomatic decisions. That necessary knowledge, Lippmann wrote, “cannot be had by glancing at newspapers, listening to snatches of radio comment, watching politicians perform on television.”³² The problem, as he had repeatedly pointed out over the years, was that the public did not pay enough attention to the news. But, as he discovered during WWI, even diligently following a story would not necessarily uncover the truth.

Moreover, when the decision is critical and urgent, the public will not be told the whole truth. . . . When distant and unfamiliar and complex things are communicated to great masses of people, the truth suffers a considerable and often a radical distortion. The complex is made over into the simple, the hypothetical into the dogmatic, and the relative into the absolute. Even when there is no deliberate distortion by censorship and propaganda, which is unlikely in time of war, the public opinion of the masses cannot be counted upon to apprehend regularly and promptly the reality of things. There is an inherent tendency in opinion to feed upon rumors excited by our own wishes and fears.³³

²⁹ “Once again the people were drugged by the propaganda.” Lippmann, *Essays*, 23-24.

³⁰ Lippmann, *Essays*, 13 – 14.

³¹ Lippmann, *Essays*, 14.

³² Lippmann, *Essays*, 25.

³³ Lippmann, *Essays*, 25.

Public opinion was not only uninformed and irrational, but often, by the time it coalesced, Lippmann contended, irrelevant. “The movement of opinion is slower than the movement of events,” he wrote. “Just because they are mass opinions there is an inertia in them. It takes much longer to change many minds than to change a few. It takes time to inform and to persuade and to arouse large scattered varied multitudes of persons.”³⁴ Lippmann argued politicians were hamstrung by the slow pace of public opinion. The tempo of the political environment inhibited elected officials, despite their knowledge of a situation, from speaking out. “The general rule is that a democratic politician had better not be right too soon,” he wrote. “Very often the penalty is political death. It is much safer to keep in step with the parade of opinion than to try to keep up with the swifter movement of events.”³⁵

Although he wrote about the virtue of the electoral process in 1952, Lippmann had low expectations for the 1952 Congress; his only solace was “the very faint and, perhaps, fatuous hope that more and more will realize, assisted by the press and radio, that the biggest news anyone could make would be good news.”³⁶ He suggested any member of the legislative branch who was serious about rehabilitating his poor approval ratings would do well to emulate the example of their more esteemed colleagues rather than chasing after public opinion. “The best way to be popular,” Lippmann wrote, “is not to be, in the strict and refined sense of the old word, a slobberer over the public interest.”³⁷ To this end, he evaluated a presidents’ leadership via the optics of how they

³⁴ Lippmann, *Essays*, 20.

³⁵ Lippmann, *Essays*, 26.

³⁶ Walter Lippmann, “The Usurpers,” T&T, January 17, 1952.

³⁷ Lippmann, “The Usurpers.”

dealt with public opinion – whether they followed, led, or manipulated it. He noted that although John F. Kennedy enjoyed tremendous personal popularity, the President struggled to communicate his vision to the nation, which led to difficulties implementing his agenda. Lippmann diagnosed Kennedy’s weakness as caring too much about public opinion: “He does not want to be unpopular anywhere – anywhere—with anyone; and I think that a public leader, at times, has to get into struggles where somebody gets a bloody nose.”³⁸ In contrast, Lippmann praised Lyndon Johnson’s instinct for molding public sentiment.³⁹ President Johnson, he noted approvingly, had an insider’s knack for building consensus. “He doesn’t have to be taught it.”⁴⁰

Here, again, Lippmann’s views revealed inconsistencies. Despite his endorsement of Johnson’s consensus-building style of governing, Lippmann still maintained elites were the most important audience for leaders to woo. To be successful, he said, a president need not articulate his vision to the masses, but to that subset of people who carried out the business of public affairs. “What you must lead in a country are the best of the country and they will carry it down,” Lippmann said. “There’s no use of the President trying to talk down to a fellow who can just about read and write.”⁴¹ Catering to the “lowest common denominator” was a risky campaign strategy. The danger lay in alienating those “who really make opinion and decide elections,” he said. “They don’t want to be talked down to.”⁴² In some instances, Lippmann argued, the government was

³⁸ *Conversations with Walter Lippmann*, May 1, 1963 interview, 146.

³⁹ Walter Lippmann, “The Principle of the Great Society,” *Newsweek*, January 18, 1965, 13.

⁴⁰ *Conversations with Walter Lippmann*, February 22, 1965 interview, 223.

⁴¹ “He must talk to the people who teach the man to read and write.” *Conversations with Walter Lippmann*, August 11, 1960 interview, 16-17.

⁴² *Conversations with Walter Lippmann*, April 8, 1964 interview, 185-186.

justified in withholding information that might help the public better judge public affairs. In one of his CBS interviews, he defended President Johnson for not being more forthcoming about the situation in Vietnam. “Well, I think he’s in a very difficult position,” Lippmann told CBS news commentator Eric Sevareid. “An irresponsible journalist can tell the truth, but if the President of the United States tells it, morale will probably collapse in Saigon... So he’s in a jam and I don’t think he can explain the war more.”⁴³

Lippmann continued to endorse the role of experts in public affairs, explaining that the task of uncovering facts and judging their relevance required “specialized inquiry by trained minds.”⁴⁴ “If there is no impartial tribunal to find the facts,” he wrote, “then there can be no such thing as an enlightened public opinion.”⁴⁵ The role of the press, then, was to interpret this information for the newspaper reading public, as Lippmann did in his role as a syndicated columnist. “The raw news has, therefore, to be processed in order to make it intelligible,” he wrote. “For if it is not intelligible, it will not be interesting. And if it is not interesting, it will not be read.”⁴⁷ Fact, as he now defined it, was conditional rather than absolute, shaped by a number of actors in the democratic process.

All news given out by government is more or less managed. It always has been and always will be...it’s very naïve, its very innocent to pretend that news isn’t managed, and to talk as if there were such a thing as one absolutely perfect true version of the facts and that’s the only fact – there is no such thing. All the news gets managed by the White House, by the Defense Department, by the managing editor, by the correspondent, by the columnist, by everybody.⁴⁸

⁴³ *Conversations with Walter Lippmann*, February 22, 1965 interview, 201.

⁴⁴ Walter Lippmann, “‘Fact Finding’ and Steel,” T&T, July 21, 1959.

⁴⁵ Lippmann, “‘Fact Finding’ and Steel.”

⁴⁷ Lippmann, “‘Birthday Address,’” 25.

⁴⁸ *Conversations with Walter Lippmann*, May 1, 1963, 146-147.

This view stands as one of his sharpest breaks from the past. Whereas he once accused the press of complicity in the manufacture of consent during WWI, he now asserted that the press provided “an essential service” in securing the consent of the governed.⁴⁹ Where he once lamented government by newspaper, Lippmann now proclaimed the press the key to facilitating government by consent.

Lippmann’s views on the press during this period

“If the country is to be governed with the consent of the governed, then the governed must arrive at opinions about what their governors want them to consent to.”⁵⁰

In writing about the media during this period, Lippmann maintained a clear distinction between television and newspapers, referring to broadcasting as “the mass media of entertainment,” and reserving the term “the press” exclusively for the print news media. There was “an essential and radical difference,” he insisted, between the two mediums.⁵¹ While Lippmann recognized television as “the most powerful medium of mass communication,” he remained wary of its influence, skeptical of its exercise of that power, and suspicious of its motives.⁵² “There is a development of the mass media of communication,” he wrote, “which, because it marks a revolution in popular education and in the presentation of information, and in the very nature of debate and deliberation,

⁴⁹ Lippmann, “Birthday Address,” 26.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Walter Lippmann, “Television and Press,” T&T, March 3, 1960.

⁵² Walter Lippmann, “The Administration and TV,” T&T, January 5, 1960. He frequently used the word “evil” to describe the television.

is affecting profoundly the assumptions of the older democratic system.”⁵³ His faith in the press, however, had never been stronger. Newspapers, he insisted, were the antidote to broadcast; the press fulfilled a vital function in democracy.⁵⁴ Journalists, he said, “make it our business to find out what is going on under the surface and beyond the horizon, to infer, to deduce, to imagine and to guess, what is going on inside, and what this meant yesterday, and what it could mean tomorrow.”⁵⁵ Although his thesis in *Public Opinion* was that too much was expected of the press, in this final period of the evolution of his views, Lippmann concluded the press had achieved the democratic ideal. In *Public Opinion*, he questioned the assumption “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.”⁵⁷ He now assured his cohorts that as Washington correspondents “we do what every sovereign citizen is supposed to do, but has not the time or the interest to do for himself.”⁵⁸

While Lippmann’s views on the press remained consistently reverential throughout these later years, the media landscape changed dramatically, particularly with the rising popularity of television. Lippmann, however, did not regularly watch TV.⁵⁹ He

⁵³ “Nobody, it is fair to say, not the most sensitive and knowing among us, is as yet able to realize fully what all these changes mean and to point out...with sufficient clarity how this country should deal with them.” Lippmann, “The Country is Waiting,” 114.

⁵⁴ “People can’t live on television.” Brandon, “A Talk with Walter Lippmann.”

⁵⁵ Lippmann, “Birthday Address,” 26.

⁵⁷ *Public Opinion*, 174-175.

⁵⁸ Lippmann, “Birthday Address,” 26.

⁵⁹ Lippmann was caught unaware regarding Korean invasion. After that, he directed his assistant to begin monitoring television and radio news, since he paid little attention to either. Steel, 470.

was critical of the quality of television programming, accusing networks of pandering to lowbrow audiences and, in the process, debasing the public taste in pursuit of advertising revenue. “The great offense of the television industry is that it is misusing a superb scientific achievement,” he wrote, “monopolizing the air at the expense of effective news reporting, good art, and civilized entertainment.”⁶⁰ This he blamed on economic incentives, which sounded as if he expected broadcast to provide a public service.⁶¹ In *Public Opinion*, however, Lippmann maintained it was unfair to hold the press to the same ethical standards as non-profit institutions; newspapers, he had argued, were commercial enterprises. Also in that book, he complained that the press was undervalued because the public did not feel it should have to pay for the news; he now denounced broadcast television for its dependency on advertisers. “While television is supposed to be ‘free,’” Lippmann wrote, “it has in fact become the creature, the servant, and indeed the prostitute of merchandising.”⁶² (Before Lippmann agreed to appear on CBS, he demanded final say over which commercials would air during his interview.⁶³)

Lippmann thought media should be regulated according to its ability to facilitate debate. Just as when he disavowed passion as a legitimate component of public opinion, he understood the disinterested observer was no match for the passionate partisan.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Walter Lippmann, “The TV Problem,” T&T, October 27, 1959.

⁶¹ “We must not forget that the economic interest of the companies, which require bigger audiences for bigger revenues, is against any serious and lasting effect to use television for its highest possibilities.” Lippmann, “The Administration and TV.”

⁶² Lippmann, “The TV Problem.”

⁶³ Steel, 516-517.

⁶⁵ “In the end what men most ardently desire is to suppress those who disagree with them and, therefore, stand in the way of the realization of their desires.” Lippmann, *Essays*, 130.

The more rational is overcome by the less rational, and the opinions that will prevail will be those which are held most ardently by those with the most passionate will. For that reason the freedom to speak can never be maintained by objecting to interference with the liberty of the press, of printing, of broadcasting, of the screen. It can be maintained only by promoting debate.⁶⁶

He considered it reasonable television programming should be subject to government regulation, because, unlike print media, broadcast networks held a “virtual monopoly of a whole medium of communication.”⁶⁷ He took exception when the president of CBS suggested television stations were akin to newspapers and should therefore enjoy the same freedoms as the press. “This is a thoroughly false argument,” Lippmann wrote. “A television station is not like a newspaper. It is like a printing press. It is a mechanical medium of communication.”⁶⁸ Newspapers, he argued, facilitated debate so efficiently, regulation was rarely necessary. Television, however, in his opinion, was not conducive to direct confrontation, cross-examination or rebuttal, essential elements of debate.⁶⁹ Therefore, Lippmann considered government oversight of the broadcast industry both necessary and reasonable.⁷⁰ His contention that beneficial debate required an actively engaged audience failed to address the same potential for newspaper readers to tune out; for his argument to make sense, every newspaper reader

⁶⁶ Lippmann, *Essays*, 129-130.

⁶⁷ Lippmann, “Television and Press.”

⁶⁸ Lippmann, “Television and Press.”

⁶⁹ “The men who broadcast the news and comment upon the news cannot...be challenged by one of their listeners and compelled then and there to verify their statements of facts and to re-argue their inferences from the facts.” Lippmann, *Essays*, 129.

⁷⁰ Lippmann, *Essays*, 130.

would have to read every article, every editorial and every letter to the editor in each and every edition.⁷¹

In the previous period, Lippmann mocked the “guardians of morality” for their belief that certain susceptible classes, primarily the young, must be protected from subversive ideas. He now blamed television for the rise in violent youth crime. Lippmann saw no conflict between his support for the First Amendment and his calls for censoring broadcast telecasts.

Censorship is no doubt a clumsy and usually a stupid and self-defeating remedy for such evils. But a continual exposure of a generation to the commercial exploitation of the enjoyment of violence and cruelty is one way to corrode the foundation of a civilized society. For my own part, believing as I do in freedom of speech and thought, I see no objection in principle to censorship of mass entertainment of the young.⁷²

In another surprising departure from his earlier views, Lippmann seemed to validate the original democratic theorists’ concept of the ideal citizen, at least in regard to freedom of speech. “The free political institutions of the Western world,” he wrote, “were conceived and established by men who believed that honest reflection on the common experience of mankind would always cause men to come to the same ultimate conclusions.”⁷³ Although this view contradicted his analysis in *Public Opinion* regarding

⁷¹ “The dialectic process for finding truth works best when the same audience hears all sides of the disputation.” Lippmann, *Essays*, 128.

⁷² “Until some more refined way is worked out of controlling this evil thing, the risks to our liberties are, I believe, decidedly less than the risks of unmanageable violence.” Walter Lippmann, “The Young Criminals,” T&T, Sept. 7, 1954.

⁷³ Lippmann, *Essays*, 134. A remarkable statement, when you consider Lippmann’s views on public opinion for the last thirty years had been based on his insistence that the founding fathers misjudged not only man’s capacity but his very willingness to self-govern. As he wrote in *Public Opinion*, “We misunderstand the limited nature of news, the illimitable complexity of society; we overestimate our own endurance, public spirit, and all-around competence.” Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 196.

the inherent distortions of opinion formation, he now employed the same line of reasoning in his argument against “unfettered” expression. Freedom of speech, he wrote, “can be justified, applied, regulated in a plural society only by adhering to the postulate that there is a rational order of things in which it is possible, by sincere inquiry and rational debate, to distinguish the true and the false, the right and the wrong.”⁷⁴ Although his justification had changed, Lippmann did not alter his proposal for elevating public discourse. In keeping with his nostalgia for traditional society, however, he now invoked an ancient philosophical theory to advocate for formal methods of debate.⁷⁵ “In the public philosophy, freedom of speech is conceived as the means to a confrontation of opinion – as in a Socratic dialogue, in a schoolmen’s disputation, in the critiques of scientists and savants, in a court of law, in a representative assembly, in an open forum.”⁷⁶ He maintained a soldier’s vigilance against the encroaching enemies of the truth: propaganda, publicity, sophistry and pandering. His first rule of engagement was that speech must be bound by evidence. “Nobody can justify in principle, much less in practice,” he wrote, “a claim that there exists an unrestricted right of anyone to utter anything he likes at any time he chooses.”⁷⁷ There was no constitutional right to lie, Lippmann argued, and there should be no protection for untrue speech.⁷⁸ “It may be poor

⁷⁴ Lippmann, *Essays*, 134.

⁷⁵ “Because the dialectical debate is a procedure for attaining moral and political truth, the right to speak is protected by a willingness to debate.” Lippmann, *Essays*, 127.

⁷⁶ Lippmann, *Essays*, 127.

⁷⁷ “There can, for example, be no right, as Mr. Justice Holmes said, to cry “Fire” in a crowded theater.” Lippmann, *Essays*, 124.

⁷⁸ “It is sophistry to pretend that in a free country a man has some of inalienable or constitutional right to deceive his fellow men.” Lippmann, *Essays*, 128.

policy to have too many laws which encourage litigation about matters of opinion,” he wrote. “But, in principle, there can be no immunity for lying in any of its protean forms.”⁷⁹

According to Lippmann, regulation was necessary to maintain order and decency. In the absence of debate, “the unrestricted right to speak will unloose so many propagandists, procurers, and panderers upon the public,” he wrote, “that sooner or later in self-defense the people will turn to the censors to protect them.”⁸⁰ An unrestricted freedom of speech, he argued, undermined public order and degraded public opinion. Free speech exercised without boundaries led to chaos; tolerance devoid of consequences encouraged “silliness, baseness, and deception.”⁸¹ Freedom of expression existed to serve the public interest.⁸² In this way, Lippmann cast himself as an unorthodox champion of free speech: Standards and regulation would, he maintained, strengthen rather than weaken First Amendment rights.⁸³ Censorship, in Lippmann’s view, was necessary to secure liberty.⁸⁴

Lippmann was skeptical television networks would self-regulate, as he felt they had little incentive to make meaningful improvements. “The companies,” he wrote, “will

⁷⁹ While he intimated that legal remedies could effectively curtail untrue speech, Lippmann failed to specify how that should be carried out. Lippmann, *Essays*, 128.

⁸⁰ Lippmann, *Essays*, 129.

⁸¹ Lippmann, *Essays*, 126.

⁸² “The right to speak freely is one of the necessary means to the attainment of the truth. That, and not the subjective pleasure of utterance, is why freedom is a necessity in the good society.” Lippmann, *Essays*, 125.

⁸³ “Once confrontation in debate is no longer necessary, the toleration of all opinions leads to intolerance.” Lippmann, *Essays*, 130.

⁸⁴ “Freedom of speech, separated from its essential principle, leads through a short transitional chaos to the destruction of freedom of speech.” Lippmann, *Essays*, 130.

do as much but not much more than the traffic will bear.”⁸⁵ Despite his focused criticisms of broadcast, he offered only vague suggestions as to how the networks should be regulated. “My own view is that it is not possible to define in the laws and regulations standards of quality which can be enforced,” he wrote.⁸⁶ His sole recommendation was not increased policing of programming, but increased competition in the form of a publicly funded, non-commercial network.⁸⁷ Lippmann’s statement on the matter also reflected his rationale for devoting his career to unraveling the issues of democracy: “There are a lot of other things that need to be done besides producing wealth and selling goods,” Lippmann wrote. “One of them is to inform, instruct, and entertain the people through the media of mass communications. And among these media there must be some which aim not at popularity and profit but at excellence and the good life.”⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Lippmann, “The Administration and TV.”

⁸⁶ “We could not and should not have the government run the whole television industry.” Lippmann, *Essays*, 130.

⁸⁷ “No doubt, this network would not attract the largest mass audience. But if it enlisted the great talents which are available...it might well attract an audience which made up in influence what it lacked in numbers. The force of a good example is a great force, and should not be underrated.” Lippmann, “The TV Problem.”

⁸⁸ Lippmann, “The TV Problem.”

CONCLUSION

Wisdom remains; theory passes.

— Walter Lippmann, *A Preface to Politics*

Lippmann's views on the press and public opinion in the final period of this study are, in fundamental ways, not so different from where he began. Many of his original ideas are refined rather than unrecognizable at the end. The seeds of ideas planted at the start of his career grew as Lippmann wrestled with essential questions of American democracy. He was always conflicted about the power and the legitimacy of public opinion. Even when he wrote approvingly of the consent of the governed, Lippmann acknowledged public opinion was irrational; he always considered some people unfit to participate in democracy. He always felt the educated minority and the connected insiders – in other words, the “elite” – were the ones whose views mattered most. From the beginning, Lippmann understood the power of the press to shape opinions. He always recognized journalism as the vital link between the public and the government, although at times he questioned whether the press could fulfill its duty. In each period of the evolution of his views, Lippmann vacillated between assigning blame for democracy's inadequacies to either the press or public opinion. And at times one side of the other would win out.

These shifts in Lippmann's thinking occurred as he puzzled over how to optimize the dynamic three-way relationship between the press, the public and democracy. He wanted democracy to work. He never suggested an alternative system, even as he challenged democratic ideals. He never believed democracy performed as well as it

could. Yet Lippmann's evolving views involved more than just dispassionate analysis. Just as he concluded public opinion was skewed by personal experience and self-interest, so was his view of its functioning in democracy over time.

In the first period, Lippmann's writing heralded the progressive view that access to facts would lead to a reasoned public opinion. In those days, journalists spoke of publicity as a social good, a means of educating the public. Facts were considered wholesome.¹ Immediately following World War I, Lippmann's advocacy for facts assumed a sense of urgency, although his reasons had changed. After his wartime experiences with the manufacture of consent, he now considered facts an absolute necessity. In *Liberty and the News*, he insisted the press should stick to fact-based reporting to atone for its role in spreading administration propaganda during the war. In *Public Opinion*, his thinking switched strikingly. He concluded facts were not enough to overcome stereotypes and individual biases and prejudices; opinions were self-centered, and reporters were prone to the same subjective distortions. As he launched his newspaper career, Lippmann's views evolved again: He now touted the press as a solution to the problem, writing that, despite the obstacles journalists faced, they did their best to inform the public. While Lippmann never stopped advocating for fact as the basis for informed public discourse, he later granted that straight facts, at least in journalism, could be boring and unappetizing.² Lippmann built on this idea, arguing that because the

¹ "Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants." Louis D. Brandeis, "What Publicity Can Do," *Harper's Weekly*, December 20, 1913, 10.

² "Mr. Lippmann is still absolutist enough to assume that there is, somewhere, a Fact with a capital F, a fact, in other words that can be so completely and accurately stated as to have for every individual, at any time and under all circumstances, one and only one meaning. He is willing to admit, however, that such a fact would never be news." Robert

public had little interest in unadorned facts, the press had to write in a way that engaged the public, selecting and interpreting facts, a view that reflected groups like the Hutchins Commission. Lippmann acknowledged that although no one could ever know all of the facts, journalists tried to put events into context to help readers make sense of the world.

Although he was an apostle of political theorist Graham Wallas's idea of human-centered politics, Lippmann was always wary of the public's participation in public affairs. He felt the uneducated, the uninformed, and the uninterested diminished the value of public opinion. Immediately following WWI, he blamed the press for a woefully misinformed public, still believing factual news would result in rational opinions. Lippmann moved away from that position in *Public Opinion*, arguing that men were too self-centered and self-interested to achieve the democratic ideal of the sovereign citizen. Yet, at the end of that book, he held back. Apart from his recommendation to establish a bureau of experts to manage government information, in the final pages of *Public Opinion* Lippmann offered only platitudes. He could not bring himself to go over the cliff: Lippmann could not fully condemn the system. Yet, with his next book, he did not steer away from the conclusions he was driving toward in *Public Opinion*. In *The Phantom Public*, Lippmann attacked the wisdom of majority rule and questioned the public's proper role in public affairs. He went even further with *Essays in the Public Philosophy*, claiming elected officials' subservience to public opinion was destroying Western democracy; it was a mistake, he insisted, to conflate public opinion with the public interest. At each stage of his evolution, as public opinion seemed to exert a greater influence on elected officials, Lippmann's arguments to rein it in grew more vigorous.

E. Park, review of *Public Opinion* by Walter Lippmann, *American Journal of Sociology* 28, no.2 (September 1922), 233.

Walter Lippmann was a creature of the times he lived in. His writing, as people like Steel and Soderlund have observed, reflected the nation's changing social, economic and cultural currents. The evolution of his views on the press and public opinion occurred in response to those changes. He was a product of progressivism, coming of age just as interest in public opinion was on the rise. His concerns about securing democracy and creating a better society aligned with the leading liberal views of that time. As a progressive, Lippmann believed information was the key to an enlightened public opinion.³ Like many journalists, he was eager to volunteer his talents in support of President Wilson's war aims. During the war, he wrote propaganda, but revisited his views once he realized the extent to which the government and the press manipulated public opinion. After the war, Lippmann turned his focus to protecting the sources of opinion. As the issues facing the country became more complex, it alarmed him that political leaders sailed in the direction of public opinion rather than charting a course based on their own judgment.

Lippmann's inner motivations are more difficult to plumb. He was, to a large extent, a very private man. We do know Lippmann was highly ambitious and enjoyed having close proximity to power. He campaigned tirelessly to secure an official role assisting the Wilson administration's war efforts and, over the decades, advised candidates of both parties during their campaigns. Aside from his propaganda work, however, Lippmann's role in events took place almost exclusively behind the scenes.

³ "More intensely and systematically than ever before in the history of American thought, the gospel of intelligence as the key to social progress was preached by American liberalism during the first quarter of the twentieth century." Kaplan, 347.

From his early days at the *New Republic*, Lippmann was an “insider” with access to information from well-placed sources, many of whom he counted among his friends. He was courted by policy makers who recognized his status not only as a journalist but as a “moulder of public opinion.”⁴ His “Today and Tomorrow” syndicated column, read by as many as 12 million people in U.S. and abroad, gave him a platform to influence the public and, in turn, affect government policy. Lippmann, however, did not disclose his relationships when writing about issues or public officials.⁵ This was where his personal correspondence proved most helpful, if not fully revealing of the famously guarded Lippmann. As he once wrote in a letter to a colleague, “There is a twilight zone where it is hard to say whether a man is acting executively on his opinions or merely acting to influence the opinion of some one else who is acting executively.”⁶

Lippmann’s career trajectory influenced his views on the press. He entered the newspaper world somewhat tentatively, just as he completed the manuscript for *Public Opinion*. His initial contract at the *New York World* was for a trial period. He was promoted to editor of the editorial page just prior to the publication of *The Phantom Public*. In his final career move to the *Washington Post*, after a series of wildly popular television interviews on CBS, Lippmann commanded a high salary, a chauffeur, and a New York City apartment.⁷ His valuation of the mainstream print media correlated with his ascendancy as a newspaper columnist: Lippmann rarely criticized the press after he

⁴ Frank M. Firor, president, Adolf Gobel, Inc., to Lippmann, August 26, 1929, WLP.

⁵ “His immersion in politics while holding forth as a disinterested observer did not taint him as hypocritical or false. Everyone understood that he was Walter Lippmann.” Blumenthal, afterword in *Liberty and the News*, 63-64.

⁶ Lippmann to Charles Merz, n.d.

⁷ Steel, 539.

joined the *New York Herald Tribune* in 1931. While he routinely denounced sensationalism, whether in tabloids or on network television, his most stinging critiques of the press, *Liberty and the News* and “A Test of the News,” were written prior to his joining the staff of a daily newspaper. As a result of those two pieces of work, along with *Public Opinion*, many have conflated Lippmann’s emphasis on facts with the journalistic standard of objectivity. Readers who consider only a single text or period of his evolution can easily misjudge his views.⁸ Beginning with his tenure at the *New York World*, Lippmann portrayed newspaper journalists as earnest defenders of the public trust. Before long, he was suggesting easing the dividing line between editorial opinion and hard news; a degree of subjectivity in reporting, Lippmann insisted, was necessary to piece the raw facts into a recognizable picture. The role of the press, as he noted, had evolved with the changing times over the course of his career.

The job has changed and grown in my own lifetime, and if I had to sum up in one sentence what has happened, it would be that the Washington correspondent has had to teach himself to be not only a recorder of facts and a chronicler of events, but also – if I may put it that way – to be a writer of notes and essays in contemporary history. Nobody invented or consciously proposed this development of the newspaper business. It has been brought about gradually by trial and error in the course of a generation.⁹

⁸ This quote, for example, suggests the writer is unfamiliar with Lippmann’s behind the scenes involvement in various administrations: “If Walter Lippmann were alive, he probably would wonder how the media had come to find themselves in league with government, helping shape public attitudes rather than questioning, examining and describing the real world to the fullest extent possible.” Bill Kovach, “Too Much Opinion, at the Expense of Fact,” *New York Times*, September 13, 1989.

⁹ Lippmann, “Birthday Address,” 24.

Ultimately, Lippmann thought the press could not only fulfill its duty to inform, but also that it could achieve the democratic ideal as envisioned by the Founding Fathers. The press could make democracy work. As journalists, Lippmann told the crowd gathered to fete him on his seventieth birthday, “we do what every sovereign citizen is supposed to do, but has not the time or the interest to do for himself. This is our job.”¹⁰ He had less faith in the public. From the start of his career, Lippmann advocated for the elite to make decisions. This was the audience he courted.

By considering Walter Lippmann’s writing on the press and public opinion over the entirety of his career we gain a fuller understanding of his core motivations. His views evolved as he considered the perennial problems of democracy from different angles, in different circumstances. In each period, he was acting on the best evidence at the time. In an important way, Lippmann’s changing views on the press and public opinion, his personal predilections and his professional self-interest, were an expression of the very problems he identified as beleaguering democracy. These problems grew more complex during his lifetime. The Wilson administration, which Lippmann had supported, ushered in a much larger, more powerful government owing to its progressive agenda and the need to fight a total war in Europe. Propaganda, which was not considered a pejorative prior to WWI, became an integral part of government, facilitated by proliferate opinion-moulding expertise and more potent communication tools. When Lippmann joined the *New Republic* in 1914, no one used the term “spin.” By the time of his death, in 1974, the government communications apparatus was inflating body counts in Vietnam. Journalists faced mounting doubts, about not only the consent of the

¹⁰ Lippmann, “Birthday Address,” 26.

governed, but also the utility of the conventions they used to inform the public. That Lippmann could not satisfactorily resolve these matters, despite his sustained efforts, was inevitable, a testament to the intractability of the issues at the heart of the democratic experiment. Walter Lippmann's greatness lies in his commitment to confronting these questions, the force of his expression and at times the brilliance with which he highlighted these issues, making them more clear and urgent.

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