Foreword

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Beneath the deceptively bland title of this short book lie explosive ideas. They throw a disturbing light on the role of the press, the molding of public opinion, and the challenges to enlightened government in an age of mass democracy. Written in 1919 in the wake of a self-destructive war that spread ruin and revolution, this book reflects the disillusion, mixed with the lingering hope, of a young man who saw his ideals crushed, and yet sought a way by which his faith in popular government could be redeemed.

When the United States entered the European war in 1917 the twenty-seven-year-old Lippmann was a prominent editorialist at the influential journal of Progressive opinion, *The New Republic*. He had thrilled to Woodrow Wilson's pledge to "make the world safe for democracy" and was eager to do his part in that noble effort. He had become a journalist, rather than a businessman or professor, because he believed that nothing was more important than to help build a just and enlightened democratic society.

As a policy analyst in the government, he had worked on the team that formulated the Fourteen Points—Wilson's plan for an equitable postwar settlement among the warring European states.

Because of his skills as a writer he was also recruited to draft propaganda material to aid the Allied war effort by weakening German morale. That experience was a brief one, but it made an indelible impression upon him. It was to transform his whole attitude toward the role of the press in a free society.

Lippmann had eagerly supported the high ideals under which he believed the war was fought. But the aftermath brought for him, as for so many others, alarm and disillusion. The atavistic passions unleashed by the conflict, the vindictive peace treaty imposed by the victors upon the defeated, and the severe political repression that swept the United States during the postwar "Red Scare," forced him to question much of what he had taken for granted.

This did not lead him to retreat from the public arena and become part of the "lost generation" of cynics and exiles. But it did force him to reexamine his assumptions about the ability of the press under modern conditions to perform its role of providing for the public what he called its "bible of democracy."

The horrors of World War I had shattered his optimism about human nature. His propaganda work, reinforced by the repressive activities of the government's propaganda bureau, the Committee on Public Information, had made him realize how easily public opinion could be molded.

He had always believed that a free press was the cornerstone of democracy. He still believed that, but with a new qualification. In this seminal study, written shortly after his return from the war, he probed beyond the reaffirming conventional wisdom.

What if, he asked in these pages, the press—or the media, as we would now say—is not formally censored by church or state, and yet conveys news warped by bias, timidity, ignorance, or commercial pressure? Are people truly free if the information on which they base their judgments and elect their rulers is only haphazardly related to reality? Can popular government survive, he asks, when what he tellingly describes as the “manufacture of consent” is a private enterprise held to no standards of responsibility?

These are the probing questions that Lippmann addresses in this slim but disturbing volume. *Liberty and the News* reflects both the idealism of its young author and the skepticism about the traditional nostrums of press freedom and democracy engendered by the war. First published in 1920, it remains strikingly contemporary and relevant.

In these three essays we see Lippmann the journalist trying to come to grips with his realization that the press can be “free,” yet often present a distorted image of the reality it reports. These concerns were soon to be developed into even more troubling conclusions in his landmark

study, *Public Opinion*, and the deeply pessimistic *The Phantom Public*.

The issues that Lippmann raises here—the unsteady relationship between facts and news, the impact of distortion and propaganda on the judgments formed by the public, the assumption that the average person has the unbiased information needed to be a responsible citizen—go to the heart of a democratic theory based on popular consent.

In these pages Lippmann first posed the problem that remains unresolved, and is even more pressing today: how can a people, bombarded by information, assaulted by conflicting “facts,” easily susceptible to rumor, distortion, and deliberate lies, make the informed judgments on which democracy depends?

Lippmann’s work promoting the war had shown him how easily public opinion could be manipulated. But the aftermath of the war made him fully realize how dangerous this could be. The postwar anti-Bolshevik hysteria, resulting in the mass arrest of people charged with being subversives or “communists,” the deportation of aliens, and widespread government censorship and repression, had instituted what a troubled Lippmann in 1920 described as a “reign of terror” fed by a “hurricane of demagoguery.”

Although the Red Scare ultimately burned itself out, its scars remained. For Lippmann, its lessons

were sobering. His writing took on a more skeptical tone. His studies had taught him that the "will of the people" is the sacred fount of democratic government. But now he was driven to consider a disquieting problem.

What if that will is deliberately manipulated by propaganda, or twisted by unscrupulous journalists or politicians? In that case the "will of the people" may rest on a shaky moral foundation. The problem was to find a way by which the rivers of opinion that fed public opinion could be purified. Only then could democratic government be fully responsible.

Traditional theories of government had become outmoded, according to Lippmann, because they failed to take into account two profound changes. The first was the concentration of power in the executive over the legislative branch. This was caused by the incessant growth of government in war and peace. The second was the increasingly important role of the press in molding public opinion. The impact of these two developments, he maintains in a striking observation that seems ever more relevant, changes the very balance of government.

The growth of executive power means that "decisions in the modern state" are no longer made as a result of the interaction of the legislature and the executive, of Congress and the White House, but rather "of public opinion and . . . ex-

ecutive [power].” The legislature can obstruct, but through the press the executive branch can go directly to the people.

At first glance this would seem to enhance the beneficial role of public opinion. But in effect what does the public really know? In large part it knows that which it learns from the press. This exalts the role of the press. But it also intensifies the need for accurate, unbiased reporting. For a democratic system to have real meaning, the news must be kept free of manipulation and pollution. Otherwise the “will of the people” becomes stripped of moral meaning. Truly democratic government becomes a fiction. For this reason, Lippmann insists, no task is more urgent than that of the protection of opinion. This had become the “basic problem of democracy.”

Liberty had to be seen in a new light, one not defined by what is forbidden or permitted. Rather, liberty should be viewed as a process, “the name we give to measures by which we protect and increase the veracity of the information upon which we act.” Liberty is not the absence of restraint, but “the construction of a system of information increasingly independent of opinion.”

In this formulation the remedy lies not in providing greater tolerance for diverse opinions, but rather in protecting the stream of news from which opinions are formed. This means making

publishers more accountable for the accuracy of the information they purvey, and making journalism a disciplined profession subject to rigorous standards of objectivity and professionalism.

This is a striking reformulation of the role of the press. But Lippmann takes his argument even further. It is no longer enough to say—as had thinkers of an earlier age like John Milton and John Stuart Mill—that the press must be free from censorship and intimidation, or that the news be protected from pollution by public officials and powerful interest groups. That is only the surface of the problem. Bias can be exposed and corrected. Journalists can be better trained and held to more rigorous standards. Intimidation by powerful commercial or government interests can be fought.

But what if the problem goes deeper than cronyism or corruption or government secrecy and manipulation? What if it goes beyond press freedom? In other words, what if the problem is not mechanical but organic? What if it is rooted not in what the press does, but in how people process the information they receive? What if it were lodged in human perception, in the very mind of the public itself?

In this short book, Lippmann suggests, but does not pursue, that disturbing thought. Yet tucked into this calm analysis of the role of public opinion in the modern state, of the importance of

protecting the sources of information, and of the warnings against the “manufacture of consent” by both public and private manipulators, lies an explosive concept of a different order. It is slipped in tentatively, because Lippmann at this point had not himself probed its full implications. That would happen in the two books—*Public Opinion* and *The Phantom Public*—that follow this one in rapid fire succession. But a warning shot had been fired across the bow.

Lippmann’s conceptual breakthrough—the analysis that makes *Liberty and the News* and its two successors so stimulating and also so intellectually unsettling—is that he makes the reader (and viewer in today’s world) part of the equation. But he does not stop there. If the press is fallible, so is the reader. Because of his early interest in the newly developed theories of psychology, along with his experience in news manipulation, he could no longer believe that the problem could be resolved merely by greater tolerance for conflicting views, or more press resistance to social and government pressures.

The deeper problem, he came to realize, was located in the very nature of human perception. This is because we human beings do not automatically and objectively see what is before our eyes. We filter the outer world to correspond to our inner world. We interpret the world as we are trained to see it. This is the only way we can make

sense of a cascade of images, impressions, and emotional triggers. "The world about which each man is supposed to have opinions has become so complicated as to defy his powers of understanding," he writes in these essays.

Most news comes secondhand rather than through direct observation. People respond to what they are told or what they infer. They are engulfed by opinions rather than truths, subjected to what Lippmann pointedly labels the "pseudo-environment of reports, rumors, and guesses." In an environment of fervent association and propaganda, "they believe whatever fits most comfortably with their prepossessions."

Here Lippmann paused. He had with great perception delineated the issue. But at this point he was still searching for a way to believe that the failures of the press could be remedied by more responsible reporting, that the average citizen could make intelligent judgments if presented with the facts.

Yet that faith was being undermined by his mounting skepticism. This skepticism, induced by his wartime experience, was deepened by recent studies in psychology and persuasion. The problem, he realized, went far beyond censorship, ignorance, or distortion. It went to the very working of the human mind. This soon forced him to confront a fact, as he stated the following year in *Public Opinion*—that the "pictures inside peo-

ple's heads do not automatically correspond with the world outside."¹

The implications of this were enormous. They led him to question what he called the "original dogma of democracy: that the knowledge needed for the management of human affairs comes up spontaneously from the human heart."² This meant that the average citizen, through no deliberate act of his own, might be only a flawed interpreter of the common interests. It also meant that the defects of democracy could not be cured merely by better reporting.

In these pages Lippmann was not yet ready to go so far. He wanted to find a way to bring the public's understanding of critical issues into line with objective reality. He believed that the press could help perform this role if it freed itself from special interest groups, commercial and governmental. He had seen the harm caused by deliberate or ignorant distortion of the news, and he still believed that by higher standards and more scrupulous training journalists could perform this vital public role. A truly democratic society, he believed, depended on that.

But his own harsh analysis had taken him to a critical juncture. The bitter experience of a terri-

¹ From chapter 1 of *Public Opinion*. See my *Walter Lippmann and the American Century* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980), p. 181.

² From chapter 15 of *Public Opinion*. See *Walter Lippmann and the American Century*, p. 181.

ble war, entered under the banner of high ideals, but conducted under a shroud of lies and propaganda, lay just behind him. The shadow of disillusionment inherent in his own powerful argument had not yet overtaken him. In this important and unduly neglected book these two forces wage their preliminary battle.

Liberty and the News

In writing this tract I have dared to believe that many things were possible because of the personal example offered to all who practice journalism by Mr. C. P. Scott, for over forty-five years editor-in-chief of the *Manchester Guardian*. In the light of his career it cannot seem absurd or remote to think of freedom and truth in relation to the news.

Two of the essays in this volume, "What Modern Liberty Means" and "Liberty and the News," were published originally in the *Atlantic Monthly*. I wish to thank Mr. Ellery Sedgwick for the encouragement he gave me while writing them, and for permission to reprint them in this volume.

W. L.
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