Walter Lippmann’s Public Opinion Revisited, Public Opinion by Walter Lippmann, New Brunswick (NJ), Transaction Publishers, 1991, 427 pp., €15.00, ISBN: 978-1560009993 [originally published by the Macmillan Company in 1922]

We have chosen Walter Lippmann’s Public Opinion for an extended book review – the only one to be published in this special issue on the impact of the coronavirus on religious social life – for two main reasons: it is considered a classic in communication studies, and, in our view, it provides us with a lens that gives us a longer perspective through which to view the confused and confusing situation in the public sphere resulting from the catastrophe that the Covid-19 pandemic has caused. The time is opportune to revisit this landmark book.

It is not the first time that the book has lately been revisited in other communications journals.

Petersen (2003, 258) wrote in Journalism defending Lippmann’s support for democracy, in spite of his strong criticism of the myth of a democracy ruled by the sovereignty of the informed citizen and his proposal of delegating to experts the task and challenge of collecting the relevant information about social life and giving it to the statesmen who really decide. Petersen rightly ends his review of Lippmann’s book with a keen question: Although Lippmann never commented on the problem that experts – Lippmann himself included – also have pictures in their heads as well as prejudices and stereotypes in their reasoning, there is no doubt that it is still worth revisiting Lippmann.

Kaid, Negrine, and Hallahan (2004) did another review in Journalism Studies, each author covering a different perspective: Kaid traces the leading communications researchers who have borrowed from Lippman’s intuitions, Negrine interprets the second Iraq war through Lippmann’s ideas on the ‘manufacture of consent’, and Hallahan convincingly shows the strong influence that Public Opinion had on Lee and Bernays, the forefathers of Public Relations.

Lippman’s book was written in the aftermath of the bloody experience of World War I, the first real ‘global event’, which had an impact in the lives of people all over the world. Lippmann was very much involved in it, mainly as one of the drafters of the Fourteen Points speech by Woodrow Wilson to the United States Congress, where Wilson sketched out his vision to put an end to the war that would bring a ‘just and secure peace’, and not merely ‘a new balance of power’.

The covid-19 pandemic is the most recent global shared experience after World Wars I and II that the human race is undergoing. Lippmann’s reflections about the way public affairs work under troublesome or dramatic circumstances show many parallels with our present situation. It is worthwhile to study them. A classic book, whether a scholarly one or a fictional work of literature, is such when it passes the test of time, when it is able to illuminate new particular experiences different than those that prompted its writing, and when it appeals to people of different geographies and cultures. A classic book is universal in range, both in time and in space.

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The world before Lippmann’s eyes and the pictures in his head – loosely borrowing his successful image in Chapter I of Public Opinion – were somehow quite different than ours. It was not yet a truly global world, but rather a Western-dominated one. The only means of mass communication was the press. Radio broadcasting only began to be commercially and
politically put to use around 1922, when his book was first published. Television and Internet didn’t exist. Nevertheless, Lippmann’s diagnosis fits very well with our situation today: our life experience is surrounded, influenced and even formed by a pseudo-environment that the media (Internet included) as a whole creates.

As Noelle-Neumann fairly puts it in her assessment of the book, Lippmann ‘ keenly saw the difference between the perceptions that a person obtains firsthand and those that come by other means, especially through the mass media; and he saw how this difference is blotted out because people are not conscious of it. People, he saw, tend to adopt indirect experience so completely and to adjust their conceptions to it so well that their direct and indirect experiences become inseparable. As a result, the influence of the mass media also remains largely unconscious’ (Noelle-Neumann 1986[1984], 145–6).

The personal and social impact of Covid-19 has suddenly awakened our conscience to this simple fact.

**Brief summary of Lippmann’s life and the influences he received**

Generally, a book review does not present the author’s biography, apart from some episodes or circumstances required by the exposition to underline any particular idea. We have, however, chosen to offer a short sketch of Lippmann’s life – at least up until the publication of *Public Opinion* – for ideas are always rooted in a historical environment, in a precise situation, and are also linked to a specific answer given by the author to the challenges of his time. This is the case with Lippmann. He was deeply involved in the course of events unfolding before him. And those events drove his attentive observation and generated his thinking. Lippmann was not a scholar nor were his books ‘laboratory products’, meaning just an output of library work.

Walter Lippmann Baum, the only child of Jewish parents who followed Reform Judaism and were of German origin, was born on 23 September 1889, and died on 14 December 1974.

He received a very fine classical education in a secular private school with a program of studies in the German Gymnasium tradition.

For a short period of time Lippmann served as secretary to George R. Lunn, the first Socialist mayor of Schenectady, New York, and resigned after four months upon disagreement with Lunn’s views on socialism (Hendrickson 1966).

Lippmann entered Harvard University and studied under George Santayana, William James, and Graham Wallas. He left the University before graduating.

He joined the American Expeditionary Forces, which helped the French and British Armies during War World I. He was assigned to the intelligence section of that unit headquarters, established in France. Thanks to his connection to Colonel House – Wilson’s chief adviser on European politics and diplomacy during World War I, whom Lippmann served as a staffer in that position – he became shortly afterwards an adviser to Wilson himself and assisted in the drafting of Wilson’s Fourteen Points speech to a joint session of Congress on 8 January 1918. He was then discharged from the military in February 1919.

Besides being an essayist and media critic, he is considered one of the most well-known journalists of his time. The span of his career reaches from his juvenile work with *The Harvard Crimson*, the daily student newspaper of Harvard University, and the 1913 founding of *The New Republic* with other two progressive intellectuals, to his work in *The New York Herald Tribune* and later on a syndicated column in *The Washington Post*, ‘Today and Tomorrow’. He also wrote regularly for the newsmagazine *Newsweek*. Lippmann won two
Pulitzer Prizes, one for his column ‘Today and Tomorrow’ and one for his 1961 interview of Nikita Khrushchev.

Lippmann was the first to bring the phrase ‘Cold War’ into common currency, in his eponymous 1947 book.

Among his 21 published books, four have to be mentioned here, as the most relevant for the purpose of our review: Liberty and the News (1920), Public Opinion (1922), The Phantom Public (1925) and Essays in Public Philosophy, begun in 1938 and published in 1955.

Among the authors who influenced his personal views the most, we find Graham Wallas, a Professor from the London School of Economics and Political Science who lectured at Harvard in 1910. Later on, Wallas (1914) dedicated to Lippmann the preface of his book in which he developed the discussion course that Lippmann attended. In fact, the Great Society idea ‘permanently entered Lippmann’s thinking and four years later when the materials of the course appeared in book form Wallas dedicated the American edition to his young disciple’ (Walker 1959). Fabian H.G. Wells seems to have had a notable influence, according to Walker, unlike Santayana, whose assistant Lippmann was for a short time, and whom he quoted often.

Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, who became the counselor of the group of young men who spoke through The New Republic, had great weight in these years of maturation. ‘Holmes’s intellectual influence on Lippmann readily appears in their respective writings’ (Eulau 1952, 302).

On a personal political level, his special attention to and sympathy for Wilson’s ‘progressive agenda’ drove him to change political affiliation, for he found in Wilson’s leadership and program of action a real application of the Progressive Party Platform. Later on, as we know, Lippmann was working closely for him.

**Facts about the book’s reception**

*Public Opinion* keeps being translated, as the data of the last translations we have found prove, and it is done mostly by prestigious scholarly publishers: Polish (2021), Turkish (2020), German (2018), Italian (2018, 2015), Czech (2015), Portuguese (2017, 2008), Japanese (2012, 1965), French (2007), Russian (2004), and Spanish (1964, 2003) editions have all appeared.

It goes without saying that the English editions are more numerous, since the first one was printed in 1922 by Harcourt, Brace & Co.: editions have since appeared in 2021, 2020, 2018, 2017, 2016, 2015, 2014, 2013, 2012, 2010, 2009, 2007, 2004, 1998, 1997, 1966, 1965, and 1946. Some are popular editions in paperback; others are annotated and even include a biography. Nowadays Public Opinion is available digitally and even as audiobook. One of the editions is presented as a reprint in the edited collection of ‘classic forgotten books’. Judging by the number of recent printings by different publishers, the editorial adjective (‘forgotten’) seems an overstated promotional phrase.

There is no doubt that Lippmann’s *Public Opinion* has become a classic in the field. And, looking at the data of the successive editions, we can say that public interest in the book is increasing. Between 1922 and 1966 it was re-published three times in English. From then onwards the editions and translations have multiplied surprisingly.
Scholarly impact

At that time, i.e. 1922, there were neither communication scholars nor journals of communication. It is, then, quite normal that the first reviews of Lippmann’s book appeared in journals of other fields: psychology (Kitson 1922, 306), political economy (Wright 1922, 717–720), political science (Holcombe 1922, 500–501) and even ethics (Merriam 1923, 210–212).

Immediately upon its public appearance, the book drew the attention of one of the most celebrated thinkers of his time, John Dewey. In fact, Dewey considered Public Opinion an ‘indictment of democracy’ (Dewey 1983, 337). The debate later on become heated in intellectual circles and got the attention of communication scholars, for the main point of argument was a sensitive one for the standing conventional wisdom about democracy, as Liu (2017, 34) reminds us: Lippmann ‘argued that the public cannot resolve problems because it lacks the competence to obtain the necessary information and the attention needed to make decisions on public issues’. Schudson (2008), a reputed historian of communication, has dismissed the anti-democratic taint surrounding Lippmann’s name, which we can consider an unavoidable by-product of his lasting debate with Dewey (Markay 2007).

It is well noted that Lippmann’s views on stereotype, with its distortions of knowledge and its social functions, have had a lasting influence among scholars. His brilliant treatment was immediately recognized and accepted by social psychology (La Violette and Silvert 1951) and later on by communication studies: stereotypes are cognitive short-cuts that crystallize public opinions in a ready-made way helpful for media distributions and public consumption (Noelle-Neumann 1986[1984]). Bottom and Kong (2012, 363) have satisfactorily summed it up this influence in these terms:

Citation analysis of references to ‘stereotype’ and Lippmann reveals the rapid spread of the concept across the social sciences and in public discourse paralleled by ‘obliteration by incorporation’ of the wider theory in behavioral science. ‘Stereotype’ is increasingly invoked in anthropology, economics, and sociology.

In Lippmann’s functions of stereotypes McCombs saw an anticipation of his theory of the agenda-setting role of the media (McCombs 2004, 68). Everett Rogers shares this view, and he even goes so far as to call Lippmann the ‘most influential single writer about the role of the mass media in shaping public opinion, setting off the research tradition of the agenda-setting process that flourishes today’ (Rogers 1994, 233). Without downplaying his merits in that respect, it must be recognized that Lippmann depicted very well one of the social functions of stereotypes: driving our attention towards one dimension of any public issue contained in a stereotype, which allows all other dimensions to drop out of view.

Wilbur Schramm and Donald F. Roberts (1971) included Chapter I of Public Opinion (‘The world outside and the pictures in our heads’) among the selected readings of their book.

It has been overlooked, according to García (2010), that Lippmann made a great contribution to the Public Relations field as well:

Indeed, Lippmann provided a rationale that shaped the development of public relations practice in the life of organizations as a hegemonic practice to control publics. Moreover, this public relations perspective transferred to the broader communication field as Lippmann’s paradigm for the study of communication was adopted.

Kaid, Negrine and Hallahan (2004, 414), some years before García’s claim, had proved the strong influence that the work of Lippmann had on the fathers of Public Relations:

A careful reading of Bernays’s book Crystallizing Public Opinion reveals more than a dozen excerpts and references to Public Opinion. Bernays, for example, cited Lippmann’s
discussion of the role of the press agent as justification for the rise of the public relations counsel (1923, pp. 55, 194). Bernays pointed to the value of stereotypes (1923, pp. 98–9) and cited Lippmann in explaining the importance of ‘overt acts’ or events that trigger coverage (1923, pp. 56, 191–2). Bernays’ description of the importance and workings of newspapers also drew heavily on Lippmann’s descriptions (1923, pp. 72, 75, 116–7).

Other scholarly fields claim the patronage of Lippmann’s theory: Sociology, for example (Ferri 2006).

As a final note about the impact of the book Public Opinion, we might recall the assessment – maybe a little bombastic – of James W. Carey (1987): he considered Walter Lippmann’s book as ‘the founding book of modern journalism’ and also ‘the founding book in American media studies’.

Core thesis, and core flaw

We offer no summary, either short or lengthy, in our review. There are plenty of good –some really good – summaries of Public Opinion in many languages already available on the internet, written by undergraduate students, graduate students, and doctorate students, as well as the ones printed in the introductions to the numerous editions, like the Introduction to the Transaction Edition by Michael Curtis (1991).

We think, with many others, that the core thesis of the book can be summarized in two propositions: (1) The book is a diagnosis of the insufficiency of the old ideal of democracy under the present conditions (a ‘mass society’) where the press creates a pseudo-environment; (2) it is at the same time a proposal for how to circumvent the primary defect of democracy, the impossible ideal of the ‘omni-competent citizen’: independent experts have to ‘arrange’ facts and display them for the decision-makers.

Other well acknowledged findings of the book have been explained before and largely commented on by most researchers: the idea of the pseudo-environment as opposed to the ‘real world’, the ‘outer world’ or the ‘environment’; the ability – the professional rules – of the news media for identifying and selecting news; the manufacturing of consent; etc.

In our view, one of the main flaws of Lippmann’s landmark book is its epistemological deficit. A programmatic declaration at the beginning of his treatment of stereotypes leaves no room for doubt: ‘This, then, will be the clue of our inquiry: We shall assume that what each man does is based not on direct and certain knowledge, but on pictures made by himself or given to him’(Lippmann 1991[1922], 25) (emphasis added).

Later on, when speaking of how our impressions are colored by ‘adopting the greater economy of the allegory […]’. Usually, then, we name them, and let the names stand for the whole impression. But names are a poor currency for things’ (Lippmann 1991[1922], 160–161) (emphasis added). The epistemological implication of a soft nominalism is quite evident in our view.

Another question is the relationship between news and truth. Many scholars have rightly but startlingly pointed out that Lippmann doesn’t equate news and truth, as if the contrary were supposed to be the expected fact. He states it plainly as something he learnt while writing Liberty and the News: ‘news and truth are not the same thing, and must be clearly distinguished’ (Lippmann 1991[1922], 358). So far, so good. We would say, in more scholarly modern language, that a piece of news is a textual version of information. Information cannot but be true, otherwise it will be an oxymoron: you are not really informed if you do not get the truth of the matter. False information is not a rotten apple but a poison. We
may speak of fake news, false news and so on but we cannot properly speak of false ‘information’. It is a contradiction.

The problem is that Lippmann, while recognizing this simple distinction, does not believe that seeking truth is the Polar Star for news-seeking and news-making. In fact, in his decisive chapter ‘News, Truth and a Conclusion’ (XXIV), referring to the journalistic telling of the bankruptcy of John Smith, he states: ‘His version of the truth is only his version. How can he demonstrate the truth as he sees it?’ (p. 360). Lippmann’s paradigm for seeking truth is science, neither journalistic knowledge nor ordinary or common knowledge. His ‘expert’ – the man who really knows about public affairs – is nothing other than a social scientist (he develops that thesis in Chapter XXV).

The crux of the matter, then, is that Lippmann does not believe truth can be attained, as he explains in his famous fictional story about a murder during a Conference. The attendees, having witnessed a murder before their own eyes, are immediately requested by the President of the Congress to write a report on the facts: ‘since there was sure to be a judicial inquiry. Forty reports were sent in. Only one had less than 20% of mistakes in regard to the principal fact; fourteen had 20% to 40% of mistakes, thirteen more than 50% [...] Briefly, a quarter of the accounts were false’ (p. 83). Lippmann’s conclusion from the experiment – for it was but an experiment, the scene was arranged and everything photographed – is that truth cannot be attained, because stereotypes prevent us from getting at it.

Luka Brajnović, a journalist and also scholar himself, commenting on the fictional experiment arrives to the opposite conclusion: the fact is that only one could have been a journalist (Brajnović 1979, 61) for only one had less than 20% of mistakes. Needless to say that no account of facts is 100% accurate.

A brilliant student participating in a course on Public Opinion, Kovacevic (2021), in his comment on Lippmann’s main presupposition and underlying thesis, goes to the heart of the matter:

The author’s central point of reference in developing his argument is the *allegory of the cave* presented to the Western searchers of a life well lived by none other than the great Plato. Its serves its purpose well, because it relies on the concept of a *primordial division of reality into two parts*: the world of forms (ideas) and the lesser, illusory level of the physical, manifested world. Well, that conception of reality may have functioned well in the B.C. world, but it does not function well in the A.D. world, if we take into consideration another cave, and another Cave Man, spoken of not by Plato but by G.K. Chesterton. Chesterton was keen enough to notice that what happened in the cave of Bethlehem on a starry night in 0 A.D. changed the structure of reality forever, merging the two dimensions of spiritual and material worlds into one and rendering the great debate of the School of Athens obsolete [...] In other words, the person of Jesus Christ has made it possible for us to criticize Lippmann’s thesis and its tendency to sway towards *nominalism*. A Catholic perspective of the dissonance between the world outside and the ‘picture in our heads’ takes into account that the Cave Man of Bethlehem has ennobled human nature with a certain inner compass, an innate *ability to perceive reality as it truly is*. The cave became larger than the universe. Man is enabled to fulfill his vocation assigned to him in Eden: the proper governing and stewarding of the visible world, himself included. The diagnosis of *pseudo-environment* syndrome is no longer fatal and incurable.

Coming back to a more earthly vision – which by the way does not contradict the student’s acute reflection – we have to say that the point is this: if man cannot get at any real truth, all we have left is illusions, manufactured consent and fake democracy governed by benign despots led by experts.
The fact that some authors, like Jansen (2012), contend that Lippmann ‘developed a fully formed social constructivism decades before Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman’s seminal 1966 treatise, *The Social Construction of Reality*, is simply wrong – Jansen is reading the past with our present lens – but it is a consequence of Lippmann’s denial of the knowledge of truth by man’s mind, a conviction shared also by constructivists.

Nevertheless, Lippmann was not always consistent with his own epistemological stereotype, for at the bottom he was a journalist. And, like most journalists, he may have had a poor doctrine of ‘news epistemology’ while being, nevertheless, a searcher for truth: For him, the ‘function of news is to signalize an event, the function of truth is to bring to light the hidden facts, to set them in relation with each other, and make a picture of reality on which men can act’ (Lippmann 1991[1922], 38).

World War I experience behind the book

Quite a few people have underlined the importance of the experience lived by Lippmann during World War I on his most enduring views on politics, the press and public opinion.

Missing the genesis of ideas is quite usual when conveying them to further generations through scholarship: passing down concepts is easier – and shorter – than providing the whole historical context in which these ideas are rooted. In Lippmann’s case this would be a great mistake, for his reflections are intrinsically linked to the facts under observation. And War World I was his laboratory.

Quoting all the references to specific events about War World I we can find in his book would be tiresome and ultimately useless. We will offer just a modest sample: ‘the pictures in our heads’ is illustrated with the pictures in the minds of French and German soldiers (pp. 14–15), there follows the example of the famous news dispatch of *The Washington Post* on 29 September 2019 read by US Senators (p. 17); or the statesmen coming to a decision … in the Peace Conference (p. 23); stereotypes as defense (pp. 100–103) are exemplified with war events; ‘the detection of stereotypes’ is explained with war examples (pp. 133–13). And so on.

Hamilton (2020, 4) is then right, in our view: ‘Journalist Walter Lippmann went into war an eager propagandist and left it disillusioned with the ‘manufacture of consent’. He summed up the CPI’s legacy in his classic book *Public Opinion*, published in 1922. ‘Persuasion’, he wrote, ‘has become a self-conscious art and a regular organ of popular government’.

Parallels between the Covid-19 public environment and Lippmann’s diagnosis

To begin with the parallels, it has to be noted that *The International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics* has invited submissions for a special issue celebrating the centennial of the publication of Lippmann’s landmark book entitled: ‘Lippmann’s “Public Opinion” at 100: The yesterday and tomorrow of post-truth, disinformation and fake news’.

There we find plenty of examples that make enough room for finding parallels. Suffice it to mention one of the media routines that has tormented us during the long months of the pandemic: the repetitive counting of people infected, hospitalized or dead. The dramatic figures were part of our daily media diet. It is the very same routine that the Allies’ newspapers, especially the French press, followed – splashing their communiqués with reports about the German losses at Verdun to render the public aware that the war was not to be a war of movement but a bloody one (Lippmann 1991[1922], 40).
Arias (2021), after presenting the main thesis of Lippmann and looking to the public confusion regarding Covid-19, concludes:

Almost 100 years later, in a world radically different from that known to Lippmann and dominated by emerging new technologies in a media ecosystem that has been significantly altered by the internet, the reaction of public opinion and the media to Covid confirm that his observations hold true.

It is something we have already watched before, in the context of Brexit and Trump’s 2016 election. Then, some media voices looked back to Lippmann’s diagnosis and found parallels too: ‘it’s tempting, from our perch in 2018, to conclude that democracy is broken beyond repair’ (Illing 2018). Although Illing refutes Lippmann’s pessimism about democracy, he recognizes that there are nowadays motives to give in and share his pessimism:

It’s hard to look at our current moment and conclude that Lippmann’s pessimism was misplaced. Truth is as variable as it’s ever been, and public trust in the press is at an all-time low. That stereotypical thinking Lippmann worried about is amplified by a media environment far more commercialized and partisan than he ever imagined.

Nevertheless, Illing refutes that pessimism, for ‘Democracy has survived far worse than Trump and Brexit’, and Lippmann ‘seems to have missed something essential about the elasticity of democratic systems’.

Many similar voices may be found in media analyses that have pointed out these parallels. In our opinion, that connection can be made any time democracy is at risk from corruption or from inclination to an authoritarian leaning under the form of a soft despotism, as has been the case today for two decades, as Elster (1993, 2) points out:

According to Tocqueville, democracy not only contains the germs of an ubiquitous and intrusive totalitarianism (however gentle and protective it may also be), but also contains the risk of creating an industrial aristocracy that could produce a new kind of authoritarianism – tendencies that could develop within the democratic framework.

There is no doubt that the actual crisis of journalism is the same as the crisis of Western democracy (Suárez 2018).

**Conclusion**

Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1986[1984], 143) warns that after reading Lippmann’s *Public Opinion* – a work that relates public opinion to journalism – anyone could say: ‘I still don’t know what public opinion is’. The book ‘has remarkably little to do with public opinion directly. In fact, Lippmann’s definition of public opinion is one of the few weak passages of the book’.

Lippmann’s title is, in our view, a misleading one for a successful book that really deals with correcting the ‘myth’ of democracy under the new conditions of the Great Society where the press plays a disturbing function: replicating and spreading stereotypes not forged by the press. And it is an illuminating book for us living through a pandemic ordeal in a confusing environment, with a confused elite and people who are lost. But, at the same time, the book title is one of the main reasons for its success, at that period.

A good part of its success can be explained by its ability to present the events unfolding before Lippmann’s eyes (democracy, journalism and propaganda during War World I) with the mind of a thinker. His acute judgment transcends the events under observation and provides a lens that is quite helpful for reading those realities (and concepts) in similar periods of history.
Public Opinion has many merits, as we have tried to prove in our lengthy review, which covers a good share of its reception on the 100th anniversary after its first edition, and it has also some flaws, observed by many others too. In any case it continues to deserve reading, both by scholars and students.

Notes

1. The first experimental music broadcasts, from Marconi’s factory in Chelmsford, began in 1920. Two years later, in October 1922, a consortium of radio manufacturers formed the British Broadcasting Company (BBC).
2. The most acclaimed biography of Lippmann was written by Ronald Steel (1980): Walter Lippmann and the American Century. It was translated into Spanish in 2007. There is also an Italian biography more centered in his intellectual life, by Regalzi (2010). Lippmann’s Wikipedia page is a good brief account also.

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