Walter Lippmann’s Ethical Challenge to the Individual

Steve Urbanski

Abstract

This essay analyzes in hermeneutic fashion random concepts of the individual from three of philosopher Walter Lippmann’s major works, Liberty and the News, Public Opinion, and The Phantom Public. The article addresses the following: By considering Lippmann’s multileveled representation of the individual, 21st-century media professionals can become empowered to avoid emotivism and strive toward a more narrative-based form of ethics. The article compares and contrasts Lippmann’s representation of the individual with John Dewey’s Great Community and Daniel Boorstin’s notion of the pseudo-event.

Keywords
individual, narrative, emotivism, ethics, pseudo-events

Introduction and Thesis Statement

In a March 10, 2011, column in The New York Times, David Brooks (2011), unabashedly casts a critical eye at America’s love affair with itself. Brooks cites some alarming statistics: A recent survey indicates that 70% of high school students believe that their leadership skills are above average. A scant 2% rank these skills as below average. On a global scale, Brooks writes, American students consistently fare poorly on math tests, yet most view themselves as “really good in math.” Conversely, Asian students, who on average do much better on the tests, see themselves with much less self-confidence.

This love affair with the self has a darker connection to capitalism. Americans in particular consume like no one on earth. They decorate their lives with pretty things that too-often cost more than most can afford. The answer? Credit. Debt. Then more debt. As their narcissistic image becomes better trimmed with possessions, their corresponding level of debt grows and grows to epic proportions. Brooks skillfully links this increasing level of want to the ethical dimension of community. The ancient Greek concept of the polis is built on the notion of citizens realizing their place and role within the city-state. This significant web of connections should inform our modern sense of citizenship. Strong communities and strong democracies are built on the belief that no one person should be stronger than a community, a state, or a country. Yet our uncontrollable drain on our resources—both natural and man-made—pay no mind to future generations. Our belief seems to be, “We are here right now. We are important. We are special.”

A half a century ago, historian Daniel J. Boorstin (1961/1992) coined the provocative phrase “pseudo-event” in his epic work The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America while eerily describing “the world of our making, how we have used our wealth, our literacy, our technology, and our progress, to create the thicket of unreality which stands between us and the facts of life” (p. 11). The flood of pseudo-events that construct this “thicket” engulfs everything from human beings—are they, in Boorstin’s words, tried-and-tested heroes or simply run-of-the-mill celebrities—to travel, ideas, and art forms. The infatuation with man-made entities results in more people caring less about what is real. With the ever-growing popularity of reality shows, video games, fantasy sports, online poker, and celebrities in general, more and more people are becoming detached from rational, cognitive thought (Festinger, 1957; Kohlberg, 1981; Piaget, 1952). News events occur and people comment on them. But all too frequently, the numbness generated by Boorstin’s pseudo-events takes over. More significant, however, is that human morality and ethics are all that stands between this constructed thicket and us.

At the same time Boorstin was grappling with the concept of the pseudo-event, journalist and philosopher Walter Lippmann attempted to reconcile the tension between liberty and democracy and the role journalists play within that delicate relationship (Steel, 1999). One of the most significant contributions of Lippmann is the realization of the dire state facing journalism without strong contributions on the part of...
each individual. This is the focus of this essay: By considering Walter Lippmann’s multileveled representation of the individual, media professionals can become empowered to avoid emotivism and strive toward a more narrative-based form of ethics. For the purposes of this research, the term emotivism is defined by the groundbreaking research of Ayer (1952) and Stevenson (1937/1963) as actions not expressing propositions but rather emotional attitudes.

The concept of the narrative is defined via Fisher’s (1989) framework in which he sees humans as “storytellers” who view the world based on “their inherent awareness of narrative probability, what constitutes a coherent story, and their constant habit of testing narrative fidelity, whether or not the stories they experience ring true with the stories they know to be true in their lives” (p. 5). The concepts of narrative probability and narrative fidelity are particularly adept to journalism studies because they embody two similar realms central to Lippmann’s literature: the world outside and the pictures in our heads.

Method

This essay analyzes in hermeneutic fashion random concepts of the individual from three of Lippmann’s major works, Liberty and The News (1919/1995), Public Opinion (1922/1997), and The Phantom Public (1927/2011). Lippmann’s view of liberty and democracy—and the corresponding role of the press—changed throughout his life. He was incredibly idealistic early in his life but soon concluded that public opinion was a response not to truths per se but largely a response “to a ‘pseudo-environment’ that exists between us and the outside world” (Lippmann, 1919/1995, p. 4). The manner in which Lippmann frames the individual is significant to contemporary ethics because it challenges us to use critical thinking to analyze how the numerous unseen forces around us—such as power, economics, culture, and politics—affect the ethical dilemmas we encounter on a daily basis. All of these forces greatly influenced Lippmann and not always in a positive fashion, but his oft-negative conclusions of the press can empower us in a positive manner to strive toward Fisher’s narrative-based form of ethics. As Liberty and the News is very short at 92 pages, the individual is clearly represented in each of its three chapters. Public Opinion, at 28 chapters, and The Phantom Public, at 16 chapters, are much longer, so for the purposes of keeping this essay at a reasonable length, representations of the individual in Public Opinion are framed chiefly from Chapter 1 as “The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads” is one of Lippmann’s signature concepts. Other representations of the individual are from Part 3 on “Stereotypes,” Part 5 on “The Making of a Common Will,” and Part 7 on “Newspapers.” From The Phantom Public, the following chapters are surveyed—1, 3, 4, 8, 13, and 14—because they best capture Lippmann’s representation of the individual.

Dying for a Country but Not Thinking for It

In Liberty and the News, Lippmann goes to great length to build up the press by challenging its delusive, self-consumed nature. By doing this, he turns each individual’s attention (whether a citizen or a journalist) to this taken-for-granted realization: Liberty and democracy are precious gifts and both citizens and journalists play an intricate role in this delicate balance. Americans, Lippmann writes in Liberty and the News, are “willing to die for their country, but not willing to think for it,” and the work of reporters “has thus become confused with the work of preachers, revivalists, prophets and agitators” (Lippmann, 1995, p. 11). How can these words written nearly a century ago empower us today? As the 24-hr news cycle becomes whirlpool-like, more and more celebrity and entertainment news is drawn in and mixed with the factual information necessary to maintain a democratic society. The former frequently dilutes the latter and the result, in Lippmann’s words, is “incompetence and aimlessness, corruption and disloyalty, panic and ultimate disaster” (Lippmann, 1995, p. 14).

Lippmann was ahead of his time. In the early 20th century, he foresaw the erosion of critical thinking on the part of individuals. Without critical observation, suppression of thought soon results. When men cease to say what they think, they soon cease to think it. “They think in reference to their critics and not in reference to the facts” (p. 22). The aforementioned mixing and diluting of factual information with entertainment and celebrity news numbs most citizens from the critical thinking skills necessary to separate the junk from the relevant information, and Lippmann saw the journalist as being responsible for sorting through and presenting this information to the masses:

The news of the day as it reaches the newspaper office is an incredible medley of fact, propaganda, rumor, suspicion, clues, hopes, 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, the book out of which a people determines its conduct. (p. 44)

It is clear that Lippmann’s representation of the press is lofty. But seldom does the press ever meet those standards because usually the information ferreted to reporters is twisted and spun to meet a predetermined political or corporate agenda. The identity of each individual takes on paramount importance. In Lippmann’s words, “The whole reference of thought comes to be what somebody asserts, not what actually is” (pp. 50-51). The political orchestrating (or downright leaking) of information that Lippmann criticized in the early 20th century has rung true in nearly every presidential administration (Mayer, 2000). But what is perhaps
more significant is the broader effects this has on liberty. “There can be no liberty for a community which lacks the information by which to detect lies” (Lippmann, 1995, p. 58). Suppressing information or the selective focusing of that information is too close to the propagandizing that Lippmann took part in during World War I. “It may be bad to suppress a particular opinion, but the really deadly thing is to suppress the news” (p. 58). What Lippmann warned about has more than come to pass. Roundtable news discussions such as “The Capital Gang,” “O'Reilly Factor,” and “Hardball” have turned into scripted shouting matches (PBS, 1996). Viewers (and advertisers, of course) may enjoy the medley noise, but any informational substance is lost in the mire of celebrity. Personalities become more important than information.

All is not lost, though. Lippmann offers a challenge to individual citizens and journalists alike in Liberty and the News when he defines the “three heads” of liberty: “protection of the sources of the news, organization of the news so as to make it comprehensible, and [the] education of human response” (p. 65). These three require some explanation to put them into a 21st-century context and to make them useful in defining the corporate identity of journalism. First, the protection of sources of the news is first and foremost the responsibility of each journalist. They must resist the attraction to merely “feed” the 24-hr news cycle with whatever tidbit (often gossipy tidbits) everyone else is reporting. This is where the organization aspect of Lippmann’s advice comes into play. As mentioned earlier, Lippmann saw the news of the day as a jumbled collection of everything from facts and rumors to hopes and fears. The selecting and ordering of news is vital to liberty and democracy, and Lippmann believes the press falls woefully short in this realm. The responsibility of news selection may begin with editors but it has a trickle-down effect. Each individual also bears a certain responsibility for the type of information he or she consumes, and this is where moral and critical thinking perhaps underpins ethical action. It is also why Lippmann’s third piece of advice, education of human response, is arguably the most important because without a human response that is guided by critical thinking—on the part of both reporters and citizens—protection of the sources of the news and organization of that news becomes at best ineffective, at worst the news becomes purposely misguided and orchestrated by special interests.

This form of reporting, Lippmann argues, must be scientific in nature. It is not a matter of interviewing people and reflecting those responses. “Good reporting requires the exercise of the highest of the scientific virtues” (p. 74). Objective reporting, he stresses, is impossible because of the many biases each reporter harbors. However, the use of objective reporting methods should be the goal of every reporter because then and only then can another reporter obtain the same results—just as a second scientific researcher can obtain the same results by utilizing the methodology of the previous scientist.

Distortions and the Individual Mind

The distortion of information within our minds is the primary focus of Public Opinion (Lippmann, 1997). The eerily titled first chapter, “The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads,” captures Lippmann’s concern with individuals, both journalists and citizens. Neither can objectively see the world outside because we too frequently believe the pictures in our minds, and those pictures are constantly tainted by the biases we harbor. “The mind’s eye,” as Lippmann terms it, sees the world in a unique way. “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” (p. 9). This relationship between the mind and the world is paramount in Lippmann’s challenge to the individual. In one sense, it seems impossible for reporters to effectively report events and for individuals to consume that information because the process involves a complex triangular relationship “between the scene of action, the human picture of that scene, and the human response to that picture working itself out upon the scene of action” (p. 11). Lippmann likens this to “a play suggested to the actors by their own experience, in which the plot is transacted in the real lives of the actors, and not merely in their stage parts” (p. 11). The relationship becomes a double drama of “interior motive and external behavior” (p. 11). The inherent challenge in this double drama is, on one hand, quite dire when it comes to Lippmann’s view of how the news is covered: Reporters simply can never move beyond their own biases. On the other hand, and at a deeper level, is the challenge to think critically and see beyond the too-often bias-laden news of the day and try to connect the facts as best we can from multiple sources. This might be more possible today than in Lippmann’s time, given the multiple layers of information provided by new forms of media—blogging, Twitter, interactive news sites, and so on—that are at play today.

Lippmann is as perplexed by the world of pseudo-events as Boorstin. Early in Public Opinion, he writes,

The very fact that men theorize at all is proof that their pseudo-environments, their interior representations of the world, are determining elements in thought, feeling, and action. For if the connection between reality and human response were direct and immediate, rather than indirect and inferred, indecision and failure would be unknown. (Lippmann, 1997, p. 17)

In The Image, Boorstin sees pseudo-events being generated by our wealth, literacy, technology, and progress, whereas Lippmann sees them as largely being an expansion of our personal biases and stereotypes. These pseudo-environments are crucial to our actions because they “do not automatically correspond with the world outside” (p. 19). For the most part, Lippmann writes, “we do not first see, and
then define, we define first and then see” (pp. 54-55). We are a product of our environments, but this is not to say we cannot move beyond the temptation to define first and then see. Lippmann reminds us of these dangers, which are critical for individuals and perhaps downright lethal for journalists. An individual who takes actions based on his or her stereotypes and biases is merely narrow-minded. A journalist who does not use objective reporting methods to compensate for his or her stereotypes and biases is arguably bringing to fruition the irreparable harm to liberty and democracy Lippmann fears.

The manner in which Lippmann represents the individual in Public Opinion is multifaceted. In Chapter 11, for example, which is titled “The Buying Public,” Lippmann recasts the traditional identity of the individual to one who essentially pays the smallest price possible for a newspaper that he or she expects to contain all the truths of the world. Of the newspaper consumer, Lippmann observes,

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. Somebody has said quite aptly that the newspaper editor has to be re-elected every day. (p. 203)

Lippmann casts the individual as a member of a bewildered pack or herd who essentially pays little and expects a lot. What is significant here is that while Lippmann is defining the consumer, he is also casting a dual identity for the press: In one sense, its gigantic responsibility is to inform citizens and give them the most truthful information necessary to remain free. Yet on the other hand, media outlets are, pure and simple, a business that must make a profit to survive.

This dichotomy has become underscored in the past decade as more and more media outlets—especially newspapers—go out of business. Other forms of media, such as radio and television stations, are merging their operations or sharing information. Whereas profit was always part of the corporate identity, it has now become a life-and-death scenario that results in publishing or broadcasting information that will guarantee “customers” as opposed to providing information that will generate effective discussion to underpin liberty and democracy for everyone. In Lippmann’s view, though, such discussion remains, at best, a theoretical realm. Most people, he argues, simply do not care about most national issues unless they directly affect them. In The Phantom Public (2011), he states very starkly, “The individual man does not have opinions on all public affairs” (Lippmann, 2011, p. 29). Juxtapose this comment with Lippmann’s (1997) thoughts on simple “facts” in Public Opinion:

The fact is obscured because the mass is constantly exposed to suggestion. It reads not the news, but the news with an aura of suggestion about it, indicating the line of action to be taken. It hears reports, not objective as the facts are, but already stereotyped to a certain pattern of behavior. Thus the ostensible leader often finds that the real leader is a powerful newspaper proprietor. (p. 155)

This stereotyping of the news and the inability of the masses, in Lippmann’s opinion, to care about most issues leads to his advocating the necessity for the “manufacture of consent” (p. 158). This is needed because in most cases the common interests of the public are not clear. By negatively casting the general public as a mass of largely bewildered beings, Lippmann counters the views of his friend and adversary, John Dewey (1954) who in The Public and Its Problems envisions a Great Community where everyone has an equal voice, such as at a New England town meeting. As divine a proposition as the Great Community may be, Lippmann’s representation of the masses is arguably more on the mark when considering the contemporary American public (Carey, 1992). They are, as Lippmann (2011) writes in The Phantom Public, “disenchanted” or “like a deaf spectator in the back row, who ought to keep his mind on the mystery off there, but cannot quite manage to keep awake” (p. 3). The chilling manner in which Lippmann portrays man as being affected by public affairs that are managed “at distant centers, from behind the scenes, by unnamed powers” reminds us of how the pictures in our heads can be manipulated by these unseen, unnamed power structures. Lippmann then focuses his conversation on the individual:

The individual man does not have opinions on all public affairs. He does not know how to direct public affairs. He does not know what is happening, why it is happening, what ought to happen. (p. 29)

A Collective Disillusionment

It is no surprise that Lippmann terms the manufacture of consent a necessity. He reinforces this in The Phantom Public when he discusses “the realm of executive acts” and how “each of us, as a member of the public, remains always external” (Lippmann, 2011, p. 42). By our external nature, we are left to follow the structure of society established by the “unnamed powers” whom we see in a referent manner—representative, supervisor, councilperson, and so on—but we never take time to question or even care about the abstract forces of special interests, power, and economics. They have always been around but are arguably more readily concealed today because of our preoccupation with the subculture of entertainment and celebrity. What makes Lippmann’s philosophy so significant is he lays bare the effect our collective disillusionment can have on liberty and democracy. “We must abandon,” he writes, “the notion that the people govern” (p. 51). Instead we come together as an apparent majority during elections and
support or oppose other individuals who do the actual governing. The bulk of the time the masses remain largely disinterested. This has always been the chief function of a democracy, though. More than 300 years ago, Thomas Locke framed the issue of trust and the necessity of people to “hand over legislative and executive power to authority to pass and to enforce laws which will protect their natural rights” (MacIntyre, 1998, p. 158). Lippmann expands and personalizes this conversation by urging us to think (in a critical manner) about what we have given up. The challenge to think critically (on an individual level) may be Lippmann’s greatest contribution to ethics. He consistently shows us a stark picture of how we are—“spectators of action, [who] cannot successfully intervene in a controversy on the merits of the case” (p. 93)—in hopes of rallying us to become more proactive in our thoughts and actions. Citizenship (and its embedded responsibilities) is a recurring theme throughout all of Lippmann’s works. In *The Phantom Public*, he writes that democracy, as we know it, is not “aimed at making good citizens but at making a mass of amateur executives” (p. 138). Again, he appears ahead of his time. The subprime mortgage crisis of 2007-2008, for example, was fueled primarily by greed—not only on the part of those selling the mortgages but also on the part of consumers who spent way beyond their means—and not a respect for the security of future generations (Gold & Feldman, 2007). In this vein, Lippmann warns us of

those twilight zones between nations, between employers and employees, between sections and classes and races, where nothing is clearly defined, where separateness of purpose is covered up and confused, where false unitaries are worshiped and each special interest is forever proclaiming itself the voice of the people and attempting to impose its purpose upon everybody as the purpose of all mankind. (p. 151)

This profound statement illustrates the numerous and profound spaces that intertwine and construct our existence. These spaces and their effects are inescapable and must be recognized and acted on by the individual who in relation with other individuals constitute a society. Lippmann writes,

Then, we can say without theoretical qualms what common sense plainly tells is so: it is the individuals who think, not the collective mind; it is the painters who paint, not the artistic spirit of the age; it is the soldiers who fight and are killed, not the nation; it is the merchant who exports, not the country. (p. 162)

Lippmann appears to be ending *The Phantom Public* on an uncharacteristically positive note. He is issuing a communitarianism call to arms, of sorts. But the initial first steps must be taken by each of us.

**Conclusion**

In our contemporary age of competing narratives, it becomes vital to constantly reassess our moral and ethical moorings. To accomplish this, we must realize the significance of the individual actions on the broader consequences those actions produce. Walter Lippmann’s philosophy helps us to do this through his various representations of the individual. This essay has selectively framed several of these representations from three of Lippmann’s most notable books to further reflect how theoretically informed individual actions can assist us in avoiding emotivism and build a stronger, more narrative-based form of ethics.

Lippmann’s advice is seldom clear-cut. He pulls no punches in reminding us that we are, for the most part, a reactive citizenry who would much rather feel than to think critically and philosophically. Change must come from within each of us, but it cannot stop there; it must be positively charged in a manner that recognizes the ever-present and unavoidable phenomenon of hierarchy (Burke, 1968), and it still must consider the communitarian challenge of care for the other. Education is certainly a starting point for Lippmann, but he does not want us to merely learn. He challenges us to not only think about what we see but also to think about what we do not see and how those abstract forces become every bit as significant as our tangible reality. In simple terms, learning without reflection will never inform the stories that ultimately build a narrative-based form of ethics. The praxis-driven challenge offered by Lippmann’s multifaceted representation of the individual—though framed in the early 20th century—enables us to better sort through the competing narratives facing us in the 21st century.

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