Walter Lippmann, the Indispensable Opposition

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Abstract
Lippmann and Dewey both confronted the problem of how to get the nation's highly successful science to have impact in the public sphere. Dewey's solution to the problem is well known: an underspecified form of communication which would transform the Great Society beyond the understanding of any individual into the Great Community where policies could be wisely chosen. Lippmann was more uncompromisingly pessimistic, doubting the ability of anyone—including himself—to master the range of knowledge necessary to make fully informed decisions. Nevertheless, there is a legitimate role for even uninformed publics to participate in civic deliberations: they act as adjudicators of debates in which the contending experts demonstrate their reasonability.

Disciplines
Critical and Cultural Studies | Intellectual History | Other Communication | Speech and Rhetorical Studies

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Walter Lippmann, the Indispensable Opposition

Jean Goodwin

The opposition is indispensable. A good statesman, like any other sensible human being, always learns more from his opponents than from his fervent supporters.

WALTER LIPPMANN, “The Indispensable Opposition” (1939)

Every hero must have his antagonist, and for John Dewey, theorist of democratic communication, that role has long been played by Walter Lippmann of the Lippmann-Dewey debate. Pessimistic, where Dewey was optimistic; concerned to remove decision-making from a feeble public to a technocratic elite, where Dewey would solve the problems of democracy with more democracy; invested in value-free scientific rationality, where Dewey embraced reasoning joined with aesthetic, emotional, and ethical responsiveness; interested in communication mostly as a tool for manufacturing consent, where Dewey understood it as the conversational process through which citizens could mutually form each other: this Lippmann’s errors provide the dark background against which Dewey’s virtues shine.

But recent scholarship—as scholarship will—has revised this received view (Crick; Jansen, “Straw Man”; Jansen, “Phantom Conflict”; Russill; Schudson). The familiar Lippmann created to be Dewey’s foil appears to be a phantom. “Lippmann never advocated propaganda as a tool for domestic politics,” Nathan Crick states bluntly (489). Nor did the actual Lippmann depart from the pragmatist’s commitment to uniting reason and interest, nor did he defend technocratic rule, and his pessimism at the end became so thoroughgoing that (as we shall see) it turned into a sort of hope. Both men were trying to reconstruct democratic practices to meet the exigencies of a new age. Their exchange resembled more a call and response than a debate. In the years after the Great War, Lippmann wrote a series of books, trying to absorb the lessons it had taught on the impotence of journalists, citizens, officials,
and even experts to think their way out of its “brutality and hysteria” (Lippmann, *Public Opinion* 262). *Public Opinion* (1922) and *The Phantom Public* (1925) were the final two works in the series, laying out Lippmann's most comprehensive views. Dewey responded to both in laudatory reviews in the *New Republic* (“Public Opinion” and “Practical Democracy,” respectively) and was spurred to extend his remarks in lectures delivered in 1926 at Kenyon College, published the following year as *The Public and Its Problems*. In one of that book's few explicit mentions of others' works, Dewey acknowledges “his indebtedness” to Lippmann “for ideas involved in my entire discussion even when it reaches conclusions diverging from his” (116–17n1). In public at least, Lippmann did not respond.

“There is something of a tragic irony to the narrative often used to recount the Dewey/Lippmann debate,” Crick comments. “In their original works, each thinker attempted to move beyond the binary oppositions that polarize complex issues and paralyze public discussion” (Crick 483). Sue Curry Jansen notes the same distortions and remarks that “clearly there is something about the exchange that resonates closely with our own collective anxieties about the viability of participatory democracy” (“Phantom Conflict” 222). We will learn more, however, if we refrain from projecting onto Dewey and Lippmann our need for drama.

In this essay I propose putting aside the phantom Lippmann in order to recover two aspects of the real Lippmann's thinking that help throw light on Dewey's. First, I examine Lippmann's critique of contemporary democratic practice, in which Dewey joined; second, I consider Lippmann's proposed communicative solution, from which Dewey departed. By examining their shared problematic and their common conceptions, we can construct a more nuanced reading of their works, one which throws into relief their diverging views on the roles communication can play in democratic life. Dewey's influence on communication theory and pedagogy may be familiar; Lippmann's less well-known alternative, as it turns out, is equally democratic and allows us to renew our appreciation of vital but not always valued aspects of the traditions of communication theory and pedagogy. In the end we will see that Lippmann indeed provided Dewey his indispensable opposition.

**Lippmann, Dewey's Ally on the Challenges Facing Contemporary Democracy**

We can start from the common ground: Dewey's diagnosis of the problem of democracy, drawn from Lippmann, who had built in turn on the work of the early social psychologist Graham Wallas. Wallas was a Fabian socialist, an education reformer, and a faculty member at the inaugurations of both the London School of Economics and the New School for Social Research. On a visiting appointment at Harvard, he had formed a close relationship with the undergraduate Lippmann, joining an oddly assorted fan club that also included William James and George Santayana. In his 1914 book dedicated to Lippmann, Wallas coined the phrase “the Great Society” to capture his sense of the emerging crisis (Weiner). Contemporary society was...
“Great” not as the superlative of “good” (as with Lyndon Baines Johnson’s social program) but as the superlative of “big.” Changes in communication, transportation, and energy technologies over the previous century had dramatically increased the scale of social relations, creating “an environment which, both in its world-wide extension and its intimate connection with all sides of human existence, is without precedent in the history of the world” (Wallas, *Great Society* 1). “A sudden decision by some financier whose name he has never heard,” Wallas continued, “may, at any moment, close the office or mine or factory in which [the worker] is employed. . . . The widow who takes in washing fails or succeeds according to her skill in choosing starch or soda or a wringing-machine under the influence of half-a-dozen competing world-schemes of advertisement” (*Great Society* 4). But the scale and complexity of society had not been matched by any new growth in human endowments. So Wallas found himself “sometimes doubting, not only as to the future happiness of individuals in the Great Society, but as to the permanence of the Great Society itself. Why should we expect a social organisation to endure, which has been formed in a moment of time by human beings, whose bodies and minds are the result of age-long selection under far different conditions” (*Great Society* 8).

Lippmann and, after him, Dewey shared these doubts. Modes of democratic political organization originally imagined as suited for “remote, unspoiled country villages” (Lippmann, *Public Opinion* 169) were inadequate to deal with the problems that arose as “local communities without intent or forecast found their affairs conditioned by remote and invisible organizations” (Dewey, *Public and Problems* 98). The media, even where not corrupted by censorship and propaganda, were subject to inevitable “distortion arising because events have to be compressed into very small messages” (Lippmann, *Public Opinion* 18) and because journalists were themselves unable to determine the “meaning” of events, to place “the new. . . in relation to the old” (Dewey, *Public and Problems* 180). In addition individual citizens encountering a now-enlarged world found themselves adrift, at the mercy of “unseen environment” (Lippmann, *Public Opinion* 40), “hapless subjects of overwhelming operations with which they were hardly acquainted and over which they had no more control than over the vicissitudes of climate” (Dewey, *Public and Problems* 130). The Great War had demonstrated as much.

It is this last problem that most occupied both Lippmann and Dewey. Human cognitive capacities evolved to manage social interactions in small communities were not sufficient to enable the citizen to judge, or even understand, or even perceive a society grown “Great.” “The world that we have to deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind,” Lippmann explains (*Public Opinion* 18); “modern society is not visible to anybody, nor intelligible continuously and as a whole” (Lippmann, *Phantom Public* 32). But while “the environment is complex, man’s political capacity is simple” (Lippmann, *Phantom Public* 68); “we are not equipped to deal with so much subtlety, so much variety, so many permutations and combinations” (Lippmann, *Public Opinion* 11). The citizen “cannot know all about everything all the
time, and while he is watching one thing a thousand others undergo great changes" (Public Opinion 15). In an argument prescient of recent thinking about the "attention economy," Lippmann asks, "how, while he is earning a living, rearing children and enjoying his life, [the citizen] is to keep himself informed about the progress of this swarming confusion of problems" (Phantom Public 14). Citizens do not possess "an unlimited quantity of public spirit, interest, curiosity and effort" (Phantom Public 14); their attention is limited, and thus their knowledge as well. So no citizen could hope to be "omnicompetent" in the way that would be necessary in order for him or her to have a sound opinion on all matters of public business.

"Mr. Lippmann has thrown into clearer relief than any other writer the fundamental difficulty of democracy," Dewey wrote in his "Public Opinion" (288). As he explained in his own book, "the problem of a democratically organized public is primarily and essentially an intellectual problem" (Dewey, Public and Problems 126). Referring repeatedly to the "Great Society," Dewey endorses Wallas's conclusion that we have entered "a new age of human relations" (for example, Dewey, Public and Problems 96–98, 141). There is "too much of public concern for our existing resources to cope with," he concludes (Public and Problems 126). "The local face-to-face community has been invaded by forces so vast, so remote in initiation, so far-reaching in scope and so complexly indirect in operation, that they are, from the standpoint of the members of local social units, unknown" (Public and Problems 131). But how are citizens supposed to make good decisions about "unknowns"?

Both Lippmann and Dewey confessed the "intellectual" restrictions of most citizens—of most but not all. Both also recognized two more epistemically privileged groups. The insiders to any particular affair were interested enough to invest their time in it, had taken opportunities to gain experience in it, and thus had the knowledge to form sound decisions concerning it. Of course the success of these insiders made more noticeable how everyone else—lacking interest, opportunities, and knowledge—remained outsiders to that affair, not positioned to understand it. Both Lippmann and Dewey also held fast to the progressive hope that contributions from experts of various kinds could improve the management of public affairs. In particular both looked to the new social sciences to take the Great Society itself as an object of inquiry. Such experts could cultivate methodically the comprehensive view of the vast and interconnected world that ordinary citizens were not positioned to develop.

This diagnosis of the diseases of democracy still rings true. Consider some examples. What should be the U.S. policy toward Laos? How if it all should the rules of various sports be modified to reduce the number and severity of concussions? What should be the buffer zone separating genetically modified from unmodified crops—five yards, fifty yards, five hundred? Likely the limit should be different for different crops and possibly for different local environmental conditions, but how? I am confident that farmers, conventional and organic, have views on this subject worthy of respect. My colleagues over in the agronomy department can report their
scientific findings. It is an important public issue in many areas of the country. But it is not one on which even I would give much credit to my own "public opinion." I am sure I could learn enough about the subject if I wanted to—I was not born to outsider status. But I have other things to do.

As one of Dewey's biographers has remarked, "Dewey accepted most of Lippmann's complaints against the existing order of things" (Ryan 217). Jansen's retracing of the immediate reception of *The Public and Its Problems* has documented that contemporary readers took the book in the same way, "as an affirmation and amplification of Lippmann's diagnosis of the eclipse of the public" (Jansen, "Phantom Conflict" 226). For both men, the central problem facing democracy in the Great Society was epistemic: the inability of ordinary citizens to know the world in which they had to act.

**DEWEY ON DEMOCRACY AND COMMUNICATION**

It is at this point that Dewey and Lippmann finally begin to diverge. Before reconstructing the nonphantom Lippmann's proposals for making democracy work in a Great Society, a brief examination of Dewey's proposals, expressed in a series of provocative, often-quoted—and maddeningly brief—passages in *The Public and Its Problems*, is in order.

Dewey's insiders are those directly involved in some joint action (a "private transaction"); they are positioned to perceive some of the consequences of what they are doing and to take those consequences into account in making decisions. The actual consequences of many transactions spill over, however, to affect others. These outsiders constitute the public. They share an interest in managing the broader "extensive and enduring indirect consequences" (Dewey, *Public and Problems* 47) of local transactions, although they do not have the means to perceive those consequences clearly as they ripple outward through the vast reaches of the Great Society. But the public's ignorance is not irremediable. Knowledge for Dewey is not an individual accomplishment but a social one; through participating in any of the forms of activity made available through the organization of society, each person gains the accumulated knowledge "embodied" in it. As Dewey puts it, "many a man who has tinkered with radios can judge of things which Faraday did not dream of" (*Public and Problems* 210). For public affairs, this principle suggests that if the public's activities were better organized, even outsiders could share in existing knowledge and indeed begin to create new knowledge.

Dewey hints at this solution in "Practical Democracy," his review of *The Phantom Public*, endorsing Lippmann's discussion "of the inherent problems and dangers the Great Society has brought with it" but also calling for "further analysis" of the "organization of society itself" as providing "the only sure road out" ("Practical Democracy" 54). *The Public and Its Problems* provides that analysis. "The prime condition of a democratically organized public is a kind of knowledge and insight which does not yet exist," Dewey says (*Public and Problems* 166). To bring it into
existence, the public’s affairs need to be reconceptualized and eventually reinstitutionalized as a vast “social inquiry” into the problems of the Great Society. Adopting a suitably pragmatist “experimental” method, policy proposals will “be treated as working hypotheses, . . . subject to constant and well-equipped observation of the consequences they entail when acted upon, and subject to ready and flexible revision in the light of observed consequences” (202–3). The inquiry must detect “the energies which are at work and trac[e] them through an intricate network of interactions to their consequences” (177). Experts can aid the public by “recording and interpreting (organizing)” (203) the results of the inquiry. The public, however, retains responsibility for coming to recognize its own interests in the course of figuring out what to do. In Dewey’s analogy, “the man who wears the shoe knows best that it pinches and where it pinches, even if the expert shoemaker is the best judge of how the trouble is to be remedied” (207).

“Popular government,” Dewey concludes, “is educative as other modes of political regulation are not” (Dewey, Public and Problems 207); it changes citizens, forming them to be competent for public affairs. To make democracy as social inquiry work, “the essential need . . . is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion. That is the problem of the public” (Dewey, Public and Problems 208). The results of the social inquiry must be communicated among the public, so that citizens can share the knowledge being created, articulate their interests, and come to recognize themselves as a public. While the technologies to accomplish this already exist—“telegraph, telephone, and now the radio, cheap and quick mails, the print press, capable of swift reduplication of material at low cost” (Public and Problems 179)—the practices for using these media are in need of overhaul. In both his reviews of Lippmann’s works Dewey calls for a journalism that will “sensationalize” social inquiry, making the “thrill” of seeing the “underlying forces moving in and through events” accessible through a “union of social science, access to facts, and the art of literary presentation” (Dewey, “Public Opinion” 288; see also Dewey, “Practical Democracy” 54). In The Public and Its Problems, Dewey elaborates this call through a discussion of the need for artistry in communicating public affairs. “Artists have always been the real purveyors of news,” he explains, “for it is not the outward happening in itself which is new, but the kindling by it of emotion, perception and appreciation” (Dewey, Public and Problems 184). So the renewal of democracy awaits a new movement of artist-journalists who will take advantage of the powers the new media afford. Dewey sums up with the following prophetic announcement: “till the Great Society is converted into a Great Community, the Public will remain in eclipse. Communication can alone create a great community” (Dewey, Public and Problems 142).

DEWEY’S IMPACT ON COMMUNICATION PEDAGOGY AND THEORY

Scholars and teachers of communication responded enthusiastically to Dewey’s gestures of friendship for their subject. The immense impact of Dewey’s political/
epistemological views on communication pedagogy has been documented by William Keith in his excellent *Democracy as Discussion* and is the focus of other contributions to this volume. Equipping students to deliberate with each other has long been a central preoccupation of rhetoricians in the traditions of English and communication courses (Jackson). The Dewey-inspired “discussion method,” with its coconstruction of knowledge through collaborative, open, face-to-face communication, has leaped beyond the confines of the communication fields to become in the form of “group work” one of the mainstays of contemporary instruction. Dewey’s pragmatism has also emerged as a main current in communication theory (Craig). Every approach stressing the cooperative nature of argumentation shows the direct or indirect effects of Dewey’s ideas (for example, Walton). Dewey’s greatest impact on theory, however, has been in provoking a tradition of work on public deliberation that preceded and in significant ways differed from the Habermas-inspired scholarship on the public sphere. In his classic essay “The Rhetorical Situation,” Lloyd Bitzer filled in the outlines Dewey had sketched, establishing what rhetoric must be if it is to serve as the public’s instrument for social inquiry in a pragmatist mode. In later works Bitzer, joined by his students Thomas Farrell and Gerard Hauser—and eventually by their students—went on to examine further how rhetoric takes up and creates public knowledge (Bitzer, “Rhetoric and Public Knowledge”; Farrell; Hauser). This tradition continues to place at the center of theoretical attention the communicative processes through which the public comes to know—know itself and its world.

**LIPPMANN, DEWEY’S ADVERSARY ON DEMOCRATIC COMMUNICATION**

Dewey’s response to the epistemic challenges of the Great Society may be familiar, as are some of these responses to his work by communication scholars and teachers. Lippmann’s response is less so, in part because of the distorting influence of the scholarly tradition that has needed him to be Dewey’s antagonist (Schudson; Jansen, “Straw Man”; Jansen, “Phantom Conflict”; Crick) and in part because of his own changes of mind. As has been frequently pointed out, Lippmann took full advantage of the columnist’s privilege of having opinions four times a week. At one time or another he experimented with a democracy that institutionalized virtually every possible arrangement of the available roles. In the early *Liberty and the News* he foreshadows Dewey’s position, proposing the creation of a bureau of social science experts to aid journalists in providing a full account of events to the public. In *Public Opinion* he tosses this view aside, arguing that at best the news media can report on what has become public; it has no power to “bring to light the hidden facts, to set them into relation with each other, and make a picture of reality on which men can act” (Lippmann, *Public Opinion* 226). Instead he proposes now that the experts should work with the officials charged with the public’s business, to “represent the unseen” in their deliberations (*Public Opinion* 241). But by 1925, when he wrote *The
Phantom Public, his pessimism had deepened. No one—not journalists, not experts, not officials, and certainly not ordinary citizens—could develop the breadth of knowledge that would render them capable of the intelligent management of public affairs. No one was omniscient, not even Lippmann himself, "for, 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" (Lippmann, Phantom Public 10).

To open a reconstruction of Lippmann's view, we can start by noting that in The Phantom Public he managed to work his way so deeply into pessimism as to come out the other side. If none of us is omniscient, everyone is competent; each of us has the capacity to mind our own business.

The work of the world is carried on by men in their executive capacity, by an infinite number of concrete acts, plowing and planting and reaping, building, and destroying, fitting this to that, going from here to there, transforming A into B and moving B from X to Y. The relationships between the individuals doing these specific things are balanced by a most intricate mechanism of exchange, of contract, of custom, and of implied promises. Where men are performing their work they must learn to understand the process and the substance of these obligations if they are to do it at all (Lippmann, Phantom Public 41-42).

All knowledge, in short, is local knowledge. Everyone is an insider—in some matters. Everyone is an expert, credentialed or not—about the activities that have engaged his or her interests. Beyond that, as an outsider to other transactions, he or she is "necessarily ignorant, usually irrelevant and often meddlesome: (Lippmann, Phantom Public 140).

But if there is no one who is omniscient—if there is no solution to the epistemetic problems created by a Great Society—what is left of democracy? Why publics at all? Lippmann points out that while insiders to a transaction know enough to get along, the insiders do not always agree; as in the extended example he had given in Public Opinion, workers and capitalists at a steel mill do not always agree about appropriate wages (Public Opinion 253-54). Sometimes these conflicts can be managed by recourse to government officials: adjudications in courts; rule making in executive agencies; or even the back-room dealings of ordinary politics (Lippmann, Phantom Public 62-63). But sometimes the conflict spills over these established means. At this point the insiders have only two choices. They can resort to force or they can appeal to outsiders to intervene. It is these conspicuous, irresolvable disagreements among insiders—Lippmann calls them "crises" (for example, in Phantom Public 54, 56)—that bring a public into being.

It is worth pausing to contrast Lippmann's account of the birth of publics with that of Dewey. For Dewey, a public emerges when the consequences of some local activity are perceived by outsiders, understood, and recognized as ill. For Lippmann, a public emerges when a local dispute is perceived by outsiders, understood, and
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recognized as disturbing the peace. Although our authors do not use this terminology consistently, we might say that a Deweyan public confronts problems, while a Lippmannian public faces issues. To diagnose a problem correctly requires specialized knowledge about the way that aspect of the world works. But to notice that people are fighting about something or other requires only a commonsense understanding of ordinary social relations. To return to the previous example, while it is hard to say exactly how big the buffer zone between genetically modified and organic corn ought to be, it is easy to notice that a lot of people have a lot of diverging views on this issue and are arguing with each other vigorously. To understand the appropriate buffer zone might require a doctorate in agronomy or long experience in farming—although we notice that even the PhDs and farmers are disputing; to notice diverging views might require a “degree” achieved on the kindergarten playground.

It is not surprising that outsiders called in to defuse an issue are unable to figure out the right course of action, since the insiders themselves cannot agree. In Lippmann’s view, the issues that the public must judge are precisely “the hardest controversies to disentangle... Where the facts are most obscure, where precedents are lacking, where novelty and confusion pervade everything, the public in all its unfitness is compelled to make its most important decisions. The hardest problems are those which institutions cannot handle. They are the public’s problems” (Lippmann, Phantom Public 121).

In such disputes, the outsiders, mere “spectators of the action, cannot successfully intervene in a controversy on the merits of the case. They must judge externally.” They have access only to “the overt, external forms of behavior” (Lippmann, Phantom Public 134) being exhibited by the parties in the dispute. Their only job “is to locate by clear and coarse objective tests the actor in a controversy who is most worthy of public support” (120). They conclude the debate not by deciding the issue but by deciding only which insider they would throw their weight behind, should the dispute come to blows. When a majority is mobilized and aligns itself with one side of the dispute, the insiders directly concerned are by the threat of the majority’s force “driven to make terms” (64) and compose their controversy. The process is less one of deliberative decision-making than of “sublimated” (50) civil war.

Lippmann offers us what he calls a “wholly tentative” (Lippmann, Phantom Public 133) list of some of the “overt, external forms of behavior,” aka “clear and coarse objective tests,” aka “coarse signs” (54) that the outsider member of the public can use to figure out which insider to back. In most of these Lippmann directs the outsider to examine the conspicuous communicative conduct of the insiders who are disputing with each other, taking that conduct as an indicator of the insiders’ trustworthiness. Consider the following list of behaviors, or tests, or signs, arranged from the first arising of an issue to its final resolution.

The willingness of some insiders to call for outside intervention in their business demonstrates the significance of the dispute, since the insiders would risk the
unpredictable outcome of public interference only if they were seriously disturbed by the status quo. Gambling on a call for intervention thus suggests that the dispute is indeed worth the outsider's attention. As Lippmann says, "their argument may be wrong, the remedy may be foolish, but the fact that they openly criticize at some personal risk is a sign that the [established] rule [for the transaction] is not working well" (Phantom Public 113).

Once the public has been called in, another "test" it "can apply ... is to note which party to the dispute is least willing to submit its whole claim to inquiry and to abide by the result" (Lippmann, Phantom Public 122). (Note that "inquiry" here does not mean a joint, experimental investigation; it means an "ordeal" [Phantom Public 122], a trial of strength held before a tribunal of some sort.) The failure to accept full public exposure of his or her reasoning suggests that the insider may be putting forward reasons less to identify some mutual accommodation of the dispute and more to achieve some purely individual goal—what Lippmann terms the insider's "own unaccountable will" (Phantom Public 59) or "arbitrary desires" (Phantom Public 134). For instance, in the dispute at the steel mill mentioned above, if the capitalist claims "for reasons that he refuses to state" that higher wages for workers would bankrupt him (Lippmann, Public Opinion 254), then the outsider can take his refusal to proffer evidence as a sign that he has no publicly admissible reasons to offer. By contrast, conspicuous readiness to endure "the test of public inquiry is the surest clue to the sincerity of the claimant, to his confidence in his ability to stand the ordeal of examination, to his willingness to accept risks for the sake of his faith in the possibility of rational human adjustments" (Lippmann, Phantom Public 122).

Once the debate has started, the outsider "will not be able, we may assume, to judge the merits of the arguments." Still, observing the interaction may prove useful. "The advocates are very likely to expose one another. Open debate may lead to no conclusion and throw no light whatever on the problem or its answer, but it will tend to betray the partisan and the advocate" (Lippmann, Phantom Public 104).

The outsider may occasionally be able to "judge who has won the dialectical victory" (Lippmann, Public Opinion 143) in the debate. For example, the outsider can observe when one side failed to respond to another's argument at all and can then declare that argument won, even without understanding it. In general the conspicuous fact that the winner was able to muster more arguments on a particular occasion is a coarse sign that his or her position is indeed more reasonable. (Lippmann hastens to add that "we are virtually defenseless against a false premise that none of the debaters has challenged, or a neglected aspect that none of them has brought into the argument.")

Finally, the outsider may make a "cumulative judgment" about the apparent consequences of past decisions by the insiders (Lippmann, Phantom Public 119). "To support the Ins when things are going well; to support the Outs when they seem to be going badly, this ... is the essence of popular government," Lippmann explains (116). Here Lippmann foreshadows Dewey's emphasis on consequences. But instead
of deliberating together about the future consequences of a decision to be made, the outsider is invited to adjudicate a forensic controversy over the past consequences of one already taken.

All but the last of these coarse signs direct outsiders to “select a few samples of behavior”4 (Lippmann, Phantom Public 133)—in specific to perceive, understand, and judge how the insiders are communicating in the controversy about some affair. Lippmann is thus the equal of Dewey in putting communication at the center of democratic life, although communication of a very different sort. Lippmann’s desired talk is not cooperative but conflict-ridden. It is aimed not to reach a decision that everyone can agree is right but to declare a winner. It takes place not among open-minded inquirers but between advocates set in preexisting positions. In addition it does not allow active participation by all but is presented before spectators whose only job is to judge the performance. Lippmann, in short, is advising us to debate.

LIPPMANN’S POTENTIAL IMPACT ON COMMUNICATION PEDAGOGY AND THEORY

Debate, of course, raises interesting challenges for communication theory and pedagogy. Some have even claimed that it “fail[s] to embody democratic ideas” (Keith 96). Despite its enormous success as an extracurricular activity for undergraduates, debate remains somewhat of a curricular stepchild. At least that is what is suggested by the apologies that argumentation textbooks seem required to make in their opening chapters (reviewed in Goodwin, “Theoretical Pieties”), minimizing the adversarial aspects of the activity they are about to teach and generally trying to reframe it in a more cooperative, Deweyan mode. Lippmann is unapologetic. He offers us a democratic rationale for the dignity of debate.

Recognizing the dignity of debate gives us permission to acknowledge that most of us, most of the time, are only spectators of others’ arguments. This insight cannot be prominent within a Deweyan frame, with its emphasis on the active collaboration of all citizens in the construction of social knowledge. But it provides a motivation for our long-standing curricular emphasis on the skills of the citizen-spectator. Although Lippmann’s Public Opinion does not live up to its reputation as the groundbreaking work on the art of propaganda, it was a central text in the development of propaganda analysis (Sproule), an approach to critical-thinking instruction native to the communication fields. Even Lippmann’s pessimism about citizens’ small abilities to deal with the Great Society can play an important role in justifying our critical-thinking pedagogy. As he comments:

It is often very illuminating . . . to ask yourself how you got at the facts on which you base your opinion. Who actually saw, heard, felt, counted, named the thing, about which you have an opinion? Was it the man who told you, or the man who told him, or someone still further removed? And how much was he permitted to
see? When he informs you that France thinks this and that, what part of France did he watch? How was he able to watch it? Where was he when he watched it? What Frenchmen was he permitted to talk to, what newspapers did he read, and where did they learn what they say? You can ask yourself these questions, but you can rarely answer them. They will remind you, however, of the distance which often separates your public opinion from the event with which it deals. And the reminder is itself a protection. (Lippmann, Public Opinion 29)

Critical thinking is not only warranted on the somewhat cynical assumption that everyone else is out to fool us; accepting our own vulnerability to being fooled, and even to fooling ourselves, can also be a ground for a moderate skepticism.

Lippmann’s defense of the dignity of debate also directs us to a central challenge for theory: how critical thinking can proceed at all in the face of deep asymmetries in knowledge. Lippmann’s response to this question is paralleled in several respects by recent work in the “Studies of Expertise & Experience” (“SEE”—for example, Collins and Evans). Like Lippmann, “SEE” does not limit expertise to those with official credentials. Rather, anyone with long experience in a given practice is qualified to speak as an expert. Still, those of us who lack relevant experience in some practice remain in a difficult position. When a purported expert harangues us, we cannot tell whether he or she is spouting pretentious nonsense or is offering important insights beyond our ken. What can we do? Like Lippmann, “SEE” proposes that outsiders proceed by “making social judgments about who ought to be agreed with, not scientific”—or more generally, epistemic—“judgments about what ought to be believed” (Collins and Evans 47). The expertise required to make such social judgments is ubiquitous, arising from our long experience in making “judgments about friends, acquaintances, neighbors, relations, politicians, salespersons, and strangers” (Collins and Evans 45). As Lippmann comments, “we do well enough with doctors, though we are ignorant of medicine; ... why not, then, with a Senator, though we cannot pass an examination on the merits of an agricultural bill?” (Lippmann, Phantom Public 150). But only recently have “SEE” scholars begun to examine exactly how these social judgments are to be made (for example, Collins and Weinel). Communication instructors have inherited a standard doctrine for assessing expertise, generally expressed as a protocol for analyzing appeals to expert authority. We would do well to heed the calls from Lippmann and “SEE” and reexamine the theory behind our pedagogy (Goodwin, “Force”): under what conditions is an outsider indeed justified in trusting what an insider says?

Where Dewey sets out his ideals in ringing phrases but necessarily leaves the details to be worked out in the future, through the experimental process of social inquiry into democratic institutions (MacGillvray), Lippmann in the second half of The Phantom Public reads more like a how-to manual for citizens called in to observe and adjudicate controversies. The coarse signs and objective tests he identifies are largely constituted through the communication activities of the disputing insiders.
So Lippmann’s work invites us, finally, to shift our attention from outsiders back to insiders and ask what debaters can do to put spectators in a better position to judge their performances. For example, to get a Lippmannian debate off the ground, the first step must be to create the “crisis” that creates a public—in other words, to make an issue of some affair. Exactly how do issues get made? Noortje Marres, drawing in part from Lippmann, has recently called for expanded attention to the specific rhetorical “affordances” that “facilitate a distinctive articulation of issues, as matters of public concern”; this is a question that theorists should pursue (Marres; see also Goodwin, “Designing Issues”; Craig and Tracy). Or again, Lippmannian debaters need to demonstrate their willingness to undergo the “ordeal” of debate. What strategies can debaters use to conspicuously undertake an obligation to defend their claims (Kauffeld, “Presumptions”; Kauffeld, “Probative Obligations”)? How can debaters make clear to spectators when they have won a “dialectical victory”? What can they do to demonstrate the partisanship of the other side? And so on. Lippmann depends on outsiders to make a vital judgment. Even if it is not an epistemic judgment of the merits, it is still one that communication can support or impede, and communication theorists are called to explain how.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This sketch of Lippmann’s theories has shown him indeed to be Dewey’s adversary in his conception of communication. But it also has shown him to be no adversary of democracy and neither an elitist nor an advocate of technocracy. Dewey, always a good reader of Lippmann, pointed out that Lippmann’s theories could support radically democratic conclusions. “To avoid misconception,” Dewey explains, “Mr. Lippmann means by ‘insiders’ something more than political insiders; more than governmental administrators and more than managers of machines.” Considering both workers and capitalists as insiders to the enterprise of running a steel mill, for example, might suggest a “decentralization in governmental affairs,” something like a “guild” or even a “soviet” form of organization (Dewey, “Practical Democracy” 53–54).

In some sense we do not need to decide between these competing conceptions of democratic communication. As Patricia Roberts-Miller has argued, we have always maintained diverse pedagogical traditions, each focusing on a particular set of problems and practices and each grounded in its own democratic theory; there is no single, “perfect model” (223). If society is great, then communication can be great too, I suppose, with room for a variety of local ways.

Still, as good pragmatists, both Dewey and Lippmann would know that getting theory straight matters. Critique of democracy is too important to leave to the foes of democracy; as Graham Wallas said, “if democracy is to succeed [its difficulties] must be frankly considered by the democrats themselves” (Wallas, Human Nature 253). Theory is lived out in practice. A true ideal will “express the true possibilities” of democracy to the citizens trying to measure up to it, Lippmann says; a
“false ideal” being impossible, will mislead them, and the “failure to achieve it” will eventually produce “disenchantment” (Lippmann, Phantom Public 29). It remains easy to prefer “Dewey’s hopeful offerings of communication, community, and communion to Lippmann’s austere menu of method, asceticism, and skeptical realism” (Jansen, “Phantom Conflict” 236). So I will close with two reasons for thinking that the nonphantom Lippmann I have sketched here remains at least a live alternative to Dewey—that he continues to provide the indispensable opposition.

Parts of The Phantom Public can be read as backing democracy only as a relatively efficient method for keeping the peace, convenient because it manages disagreements without resorting to violence. It is this Lippmann that Dewey may be gesturing at in his initial review of theories of the state: “just one of many social institutions, having a narrow but important function, that of arbiter in the conflict of other social units” (Dewey, Public and Problems 4). “The principle that all controversies are soluble by peaceable agreement” (Lippmann, Phantom Public 124), however, is indeed a principle and one worthy of respect. Lippmann’s debates may not produce reasoned decisions. But they remain spectacles of reason, expressing the public’s “demand” for the “method and spirit of reason, . . . even if the material for a reasoned conclusion is lacking” (Lippmann, Phantom Public 124). Perhaps the “ordeal” of debate will do no more than force the disputing insiders to produce rationalizations for the positions they hold on other, less publicly admissible grounds. If so, the obligation to rationalize may at least prod the insiders to think a bit about what positions they are willing to risk defending. Further, in putting forward a specific rationalization, the insider will often make explicit the future that his or her preferred outcome is predicted to achieve. The outsiders can use this commitment to measure whether things are going the way they are supposed to. If the consequences turn out conspicuously otherwise, they can, as Lippmann says, vote the other guys in. Rationalizations, in other words, lay the groundwork for accountability. Finally, “by insisting in all disputes upon the spirit of reason, we shall tend in the long run to confirm the habit of reason” and perhaps even “extend the frontiers of reason” (Lippmann, Phantom Public 124–25). This may be “a pruned and temperate democratic theory,” as Dewey remarked, but it is still “a reasonable conception of democracy” that “can be made to work, not absolutely, but at least better than democracy works under an exaggerated and undisciplined notion of the public and its powers” (Dewey, “Practical Democracy” 52).

One of the embarrassments Dewey occasions for his friends is his unabashedly organic view of society (for example, Bohman). Although he occasionally mentions the existence of diverse views, it is not by mistake that he tends to speak of the Public, recognizing its interest in the process making an inquiry into the consequences of some choice. By contrast, Lippmann not only recognizes the existence of diversity and disagreement among the “random publics” (Lippmann, Phantom Public 67) that inhabit his democracy but also makes it the basis of his theory of democratic communication. “Men do not agree as to their aims, and it is precisely the lack of
agreement which creates the problems that excite public attention" (Phantom Public 56). In playing out their disagreements in public, insiders create for their fellow citizens the coarse signs they need to render sound social judgments. Continuing to listen to Lippmann's indispensable opposition to Dewey may thus help us cherish even our most heated, contentious, partisan, and divisive civic discourse, understanding its "true possibilities" in making public issues, rendering reasonableness apparent, and allowing public opinion to become a manifest force in our Great Society.

NOTES

1. For aesthetic reasons I will refrain from inserting sic next to every one of Lippmann's frequent references to citizens as exclusively male.
2. It is Dewey, not Lippmann, who is skirting close to advocating propaganda here "by suggesting that artists use their skills to evoke emotions and rally the public to action" (Westhoff 43).
3. In an otherwise insightful article, Marres argues that Lippmann and Dewey share a focus on issues. Although the pair use the terminology of "issues" and "problems" somewhat indiscriminately, their conceptions of what calls a public into being are different in ways her argument elides.
4. It should be noted that Lippmann also proposes a third set of coarse signs. Outsiders can make an "external" examination of the insiders' specific policy proposals to see how they are designed. For example, Lippmann advises that a policy is to be preferred if it is so "organized that experience will clearly reveal its defects" (Lippmann, Phantom Public 125). On the face of it, this foreshadows Dewey's later conception of policy as an experiment. But again, Lippmann's rationale is different. Instead of relying on the policy experiments to produce social knowledge, Lippmann reasons that a self-testing, self-modifying policy will provide a settlement of the controversy that is more likely to endure.

WORKS CITED

Walter Lippmann, the Indispensable Opposition


