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Public Opinion

Walter Lippmann's "Public Opinion" discusses democracy and how the ideas in people's minds do not always correspond to reality; these ideas determine how people respond to the world around them and how they form opinions. "Under certain conditions men respond as powerfully to fictions as they do to realities, and that in many cases they help to create the very fictions to which they respond" (Lippmann, 10). Public opinion forms when a group of people act on their perceptions of themselves, others, society and relationships.

Several factors hinder people's ability to obtain facts, thus distorting the accuracy of their opinions and the images in their heads. Censorship at the information's source creates a barrier between people and the truth. For example, propaganda cannot occur without some kind of censorship, such as creating news that suits the party in power by limiting an event's access or information. Social position also determines what people experience and how they form ideas. "The size of a man's income has considerable effect on his access to the world beyond his neighborhood" (Lippmann, 32). Furthermore, lack of interest and time constraints both limit the circulation of ideas. Language itself can hinder people from obtaining the truth since the same words can create different feelings in different people. These factors all create a misconception of reality that causes each person to have a different version of the truth in his or her mind.

"For the most part we do not first see, then define, we define first and then see" (Lippmann, 54). Stereotypes are mental shortcuts deeply ingrained in people's lives and personalities that allow them to avoid seeing the whole truth. They are a powerful force that can govern people's perception of the world around them by giving them an idea about the world before they experience it. "Our stereotyped world is not necessarily the world we would like it to be. It is simply the world we expect it to be" (Lippmann, 69). When stereotypes are a normal part

of everyday life, people usually focus on information that supports these stereotypes and avoid information that contradicts them.

“Public opinion is supposed to be the prime mover in democracies” (Lippmann, 161). People often form a vision of the world around them based on their own ideas that stereotypes have created; teachers and parents also place ideas into people’s minds that typically do not change. These preconceived notions form the basis upon which all other ideas are compared. “The democratic theory by failing to admit that self-centered opinions are not sufficient to procure good government is involved in perpetual conflict between theory and practice” (Lippmann, 195).

Newspapers also have the power to sway public opinion; they choose what is newsworthy and place articles in certain spots depending on their importance. “News and truth are not the same thing,” Lippmann states, “and must be clearly distinguished” (Lippmann, 226). News informs the public on events whereas truth reveals hidden information or makes reality clearer. Similarly, E.L. Godkin’s “The Growth and Expression of Public Opinion” explains that besides elections, newspapers are the main way society can express its political public opinion. If most newspapers say the same thing, people believe that they accurately represent public opinion. Godkin believes “Not so much that the newspapers make public opinion, as that the opinions they utter are those of which readers approve” (Godkin, 5).

In conclusion, the images in people’s minds usually differ from the world around them and lead people to misinterpret reality. Stereotypes, although helpful for quick thinking, can harm people’s abilities to logically think and create their own opinions. Lippmann argues that people need to seek out facts to avoid relying on their own preconceived ideas of the truth. Furthermore, the media’s power to create public opinion also has the ability to change democracy. “My conclusion is that public opinions must be organized for the press...not by the press as is the case today” (Lippmann, 19).