

SYNAESTHESIA

COMMUNICATION ACROSS CULTURES

ISSN 1883-5953

Tabe Bergman, Ph.D.¹

The Problem or the Solution? Reflections on ‘the public’ in the Works of Noam Chomsky and Walter Lippmann

¹Assistant Professor of Journalism and Media

Published online

Recommended citation in CMS:

Bergman, Tabe. “The Problem or the Solution? Reflections on ‘the public’ in the Works of Noam Chomsky and Walter Lippmann.” *Synaesthesia: Communication Across Cultures* 1, no. 4 (March 2019): 159-166.

Recommended citation in APA:

Bergman, T. (2019). The problem or the solution? Reflections on ‘the public’ in the works of Noam Chomsky and Walter Lippmann,” *Synaesthesia: Communication Across Cultures*, 1(4), 159-166.

Contact journal editors: editors.synaesthesia@gmail.com

Journal website: www.synaesthesiajournal.com

This work is published under a Creative Commons [license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Permission is granted to forward electronically to others and to post Journal texts for non-commercial purposes following open source guidelines, provided they are reproduced intact and the source indicated and linked. To reprint SCAS journal text in electronic, print and/or other forms, contact the editors.

The Problem or the Solution? Reflections on 'the public' in the works of Noam Chomsky and Walter Lippmann

Dr. Tabe Bergman
Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University
Suzhou, China

The public's (non-)engagement with the news and politics is a crucial issue in the scholarship on journalism and democracy. Is the public a problem that needs to be managed? Or can increasing its political engagement offer solutions to political predicaments? Two foundational thinkers, Walter Lippmann and Noam Chomsky, hold radically different views on the public and its faculties, and on the dangers it poses and the possibilities it offers in democratic mass societies. The paper analyses Lippmann's and Chomsky's thinking on the issue. The main argument is that Chomsky's vision of the public is more rational and coherent than Lippmann's. Although the latter is more popular among scholars, the former provides a more solid starting point for scholarship. An additional benefit of the former is that it offers an alternative, constructive way forward for societies, whereas the latter leaves the dangerous status quo as the only option.

commercial media | democracy | journalism | public
Noam Chomsky | public opinion | Walter Lippmann

Introduction

In the United States and Europe, the supposed characteristics of 'the public' and 'crowds' have been much debated since the late 19th century, in response to the volcanic developments of mass industrial societies and democratic governance (Dewey, 1927; Le Bon, 1896; Ortega Y Gasset, 1930). The role that the public, the mass of ordinary people, would and should play in these quickly changing societies was uncertain. Old elites felt threatened. The public's societal role was a pressing problem that needed to be solved.

In the era of Donald Trump and fake news, global warming and nuclear threat, the problem of the public – What is it? What can it do? What will it do? – remains just as salient, if not more so. In George Orwell's classic *1984*, tragic protagonist Smith put his hope, if there were any, in the proles: the mass of vulgar, distracted people. To engaged intellectuals and others who abhor violence and are pledged to systemic change in an age of economic, political and social decline in the western countries, and tremendous suffering in other parts of the world, it seems that, as to Smith, the only way forward is to assist the public to become engaged in the political and economic arenas and to demand its rights, including a decent life for all.

Yet most contemporary intellectuals, including media scholars, are more likely to feel affinity with Lippmann's liberal vision of a restricted "spectator democracy" than with radical, direct democracy favored by many engaged, left-wing intellectuals. To mainstream scholars, the fact that much of the contemporary proles does indeed consist of distracted, if not vulgar, people, proves that people are inherently incapable of full-blown self-government. To which left-wing scholars would

reply, with Immanuel Kant: "freedom is the precondition for acquiring the maturity for freedom, not a gift to be granted when such maturity is achieved" (cited in Smith and Allott 2016, 272).

Three historical lines of thought on the public are relevant here. One is the view of the public as a dangerous beast, as for instance propounded by journalist Walter Lippmann and Edward Bernays, usually described as the father of public relations. According to them, the beast needs to be curtailed and educated, manipulated, in order for 'democracy' to function. Another view, originating from the left, is that the public is deluded, diverted, even sedated by the humongous propaganda campaigns orchestrated by business and governments. Yet the often proposed solution by the authoritarian left, for instance Leninists, namely that a revolutionary vanguard has to take control to lead the people towards the socialist society, has proved fraught with danger, to put it euphemistically, as the mass atrocities in the authoritarian-communist Soviet Union and North Korea attest to. As Noam Chomsky has pointed out, the proponents of this solution in fact occupy an ideological position that is close to if not the same as elitist liberals like Bernays and Lippmann. They all regard the public as dangerous and propose that society is led by a small elite, coincidentally constituted of people like themselves.

A third take on the public comes from what can be called the far-left, for instance the anarchist tradition, of which Chomsky is a leading proponent. The left and the far-left agree on the analysis; the public is being kept in the dark by the powers that be. Yet the far-left proposes that the way forward entails efforts to organize grassroots movements that would eventually rise up and discard the institutions of capitalism and the state, which have caused so much pain and suffering for 'ordinary people.' An important assumption here is that in principle and by and large people are perfectly capable of running their own lives and of making rational decisions. Another key assumption is that the whole idea of a revolutionary elite, as recommended by the first two perspectives, is a recipe for disaster that unflinchingly will result in oppression by an elite, either a state-capitalist one or a 'communist' one. The only humane and sustainable solution to the systemic exploitation of the public, far-leftists like Chomsky argue, is a radical decentralization of power.

In light of the election of Trump to the American presidency, and other worrying trends in the world today, including global warming and the increased threat of nuclear war, it is important that critical media scholars continue to interrogate and question the received wisdom on 'the public' that underlies much of mainstream politics and scholarship. Comparing and contrasting Lippmann and Chomsky's conceptions constitutes a relatively simple way to do so, either in publications or the classroom. The paper, then, contributes to this cause by arguing that a direct confrontation between the ideas of these two influential American thinkers shows that Chomsky's conception of the public is not only more rational and coherent,

but also more attractive and empowering for those who care about improving the quality of human life on the planet.

Lippmann's view of 'the public'

To Lippmann, perhaps the most influential American journalist of the 20th century, the public is a big, anonymous mass of people who have no clue what is going on in politics, don't have the time to inform themselves, and often simply don't care: "The common interests very largely elude public opinion entirely" (Lippmann 1922, 126). The public is passive. It is like an audience watching a play that vaguely pertains to their lives, but that they cannot, and, stresses Lippmann, should not influence in any meaningful way. The public cannot initiate policy: "The action of the mass depends on the quality of the choices presented ... The Many can elect after the Few have nominated" (Lippmann 1922, 97). Why, Lippmann seems to ask, would ordinary people even want to get involved in public life? They have sweethearts to marry, children to raise, money to make, parties to attend. As long as they are not being flagrantly wronged, they will be happy to let the Few make the important decisions.

According to Lippmann, the attention of the public is unavoidably fickle, not sustained. Stereotypes prevent it from seeing what is there. Moreover, the press, the *deus ex machina* to liberal democrats, does not properly perform its assigned role, namely presenting the issues of the day to the public in a coherent, understandable way. The ideal of Jeffersonian democracy is a pipedream in modern mass society, in which important events play themselves out, not within the confines of some small, self-sustained community, but far away in the real centers of power. The public does not witness events. It barely pays attention to the flawed media representation of events.

Lippmann was impressed by the achievements of propaganda in WWI. It is obvious, he wrote, that the "manufacture of consent is capable of great refinements." And: "The opportunities for manipulation open to anyone who understands the process [by which public opinions arise] are plain enough." Democracy would never be the same:

The practice of democracy has turned a corner. A revolution is taking place, infinitely more significant than any shifting of economic power. Within the life of the generation now in control of affairs, persuasion has become a self-conscious art and a regular organ of popular government. (Lippmann 1922, 103)

Chomsky's view of 'the public'

Enter Noam Chomsky, the most influential linguist of the 20th century and a prominent dissident intellectual. On countless occasions, Chomsky has pointed to exactly the same developments as Lippmann, namely the rise of the public-relations industry and government propaganda. Although they

discern the same developments, they value them completely differently. Lippmann sees the manufacture of consent as an integral part of democracy, whereas Chomsky sees it as a mortal threat to democracy. Together with Edward S. Herman he wrote *Manufacturing Consent* (1988) – borrowing the term from Lippmann – about the ways the American mass media misrepresent the vital issues of the day, taking their cues from the government and business elites, and basically buying into and spreading their propaganda. Small wonder that the public does not understand what is going on. If it would fully comprehend, though, what the world is really like, a social revolution is very possible, believes Chomsky. "The American public would be horrified if it saw the blood on its hands" (Achbar and Wintonick 1992). For people have, on the whole, decent impulses. If they could have helped it, they would not have let their government wage unjustified wars in Nicaragua, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and many other places.

What Lippmann describes as the *deus ex machina* of traditional democrats, the press, Chomsky sees as a stark example of the pernicious problems with elitist-liberal democracy. To him the press is an institution that has sold out to the power elite, is part of the power elite. In the liberal theory of democracy, the press has a crucial function to perform. Its task is to expose the continual lies of the powers that be – to dismantle the manufacture of consent. Yet, quite simply, corporate news media will never do so. Herman's and Chomsky's propaganda model as introduced in *Manufacturing Consent* has since been advanced by a small number of scholars and remains relevant and salient to the present day (Klaehn et al. 2018).

In Chomsky's analysis, ordinary people are not the problem, but rather the solution. As they have hardly any power, how can they possibly be held responsible for the ills of the world? Many intellectuals, themselves part of the elites, fear mob rule; Chomsky fears the rule by intellectuals, including journalists, as part of the capitalist elite. Chomsky backs up his positive estimate of the public by referring to opinion polls that show that the majority of the American population resides to the left of the entire political spectrum in Washington DC. In general, he asserts, the impulses of the public are quite humane. For instance, he notes that not only is almost the whole world opposed to obstructionist US policy concerning peace between Israel and the Palestinians, so are the American people:

A large majority [of the US population] support the 'Saudi Plan,' proposed in early 2002 and accepted by the Arab League, which offered full recognition and integration of Israel into the region in exchange for withdrawal to the 1967 borders, yet another version of the longstanding international consensus that the US has blocked. Large majorities also believe that the US should equalize aid to Israel and the Palestinians under a negotiated settlement, and should cut aid to either party that refuses to

negotiate: meaning, at the time of the poll, that it should cut aid to Israel. But few understand what any of this implies, and almost nothing is reported about it. (Chomsky 2004, 169)

Lippmann and Chomsky would both agree that propaganda is meant to “take the risk out of democracy,” in Alex Carey’s felicitous phrase (1997). But Chomsky would point out that the risk that is being neutralized, is to business and government interests, not to the public’s interests. The public is deluded and it is worse off for it. People do not want to go to war unless there is an imminent threat to their survival. Mainstream journalism, though, often amplifies the elitist drums for war. Take the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The Bush Administration went to war under false pretenses, with the abundant assistance of responsible scholarship and the media. Exceptionally, the *New York Times*, that widely respected liberal newspaper, later issued an apology to its readers because it had not been critical enough of the government’s bogus claims that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction (Boyd-Barrett 2004).

Chomsky sees the war in Iraq as an example of one of many successful government propaganda campaigns:

Evidence or not, the president and his associates issued grim warnings about the dire threat Saddam posed to the United States and to his neighbors, and his links to international terrorists, hinting broadly that he was involved in the 9-11 attacks. The government-media propaganda assault had its effects. Within weeks, some 60 percent of Americans came to regard Saddam Hussein as ‘an immediate threat to the US’ who must be removed quickly in self-defense. By March, almost half believed that Saddam Hussein was personally involved in the 9-11 attacks and that the hijackers included Iraqis. Support for the war was strongly correlated with these beliefs. (Chomsky 2004, 18).

Indeed, both Chomsky and Lippmann believe that it is easy, when you have the means, to dupe the public, at least for a while. Lippmann believes this because he posits that the public is intrinsically inadequate; Chomsky because only the mass dissemination of propaganda can explain why people have not yet risen up against the powers that be because of their many crimes, at home and abroad. Both agree that the press, all in all, fails to enlighten the public. Both can back up this assertion with research of their own. Chomsky wrote many books on the media, including the already mentioned *Manufacturing Consent*. Lippmann wrote, together with Charles Merz, *A Test of the News*, in which he showed that the coverage in the *New York Times* of the Russian Revolution and its aftermath was fraught with errors. For instance, in a period of three years the *Times* reported 91 times that the Bolshevik government was about to fall. Lippmann and Merz comment: “The news about

Russia is a case of seeing not what was, but what men wished to see” (cited in Steel 1980, 172).

Different worldviews, different solutions

Lippmann and Chomsky differ widely in their solution to the problem of the public. Lippmann clings to the ‘Leninist’ ideal, charges Chomsky. This is how Chomsky summarizes Lippmann’s views on democracy and the public:

The ‘responsible men’ who are the proper decision-makers, Lippmann continued, must ‘live free of the trampling and the roar of the bewildered herd.’ These ‘ignorant and meddling outsiders’ are to be ‘spectators,’ not ‘participants.’ The herd does have a ‘function’: to trample periodically in support of one or another element of the leadership class in an election. Unstated is that the responsible men gain that status not by virtue of any special talent or knowledge but by willing subordination to the systems of actual power and loyalty to their operative principles – crucially, that basic decisions over social and economic life are to be kept within institutions with top-down authoritarian control, while the participation of the beast is to be limited to a diminished public arena. (Chomsky 2004, 6)

Basic differences in worldview inform the different ways Chomsky and Lippmann value democracy and the role of the public. A central question is to what extent, in a modern mass society, the problems of the day are knowable to a busy public. Lippmann (1922, 14) writes: “The psychoanalyst... almost always assumes that the environment is knowable, and if not knowable then at least bearable, to any unclouded intelligence. This assumption of his [sic] is the problem of public opinion.” In other words, the problem is that public affairs often play out beyond the lived experience of the ordinary citizen, who therefore cannot judge them properly:

Thus the environment with which our public opinions deal is refracted in many ways, by censorship and privacy at the source, by physical and social barriers at the other end, by scanty attention, by the poverty of language, by distraction, by unconscious constellations of feeling, by wear and tear, violence, monotony. These limitations upon our access to that environment combine with the obscurity and complexity of the facts themselves to thwart clearness and justice of perception, to substitute misleading fictions for workable ideas, and to deprive us of adequate checks upon those who consciously strive to mislead. (Lippmann 1922, 34)

In an aside, and therefore little noticed, Lippmann maintains that it is nonetheless possible to know and understand far-removed events:

But enough has been done to demonstrate, I think, that unseen environments can be reported effectively, that they can be reported to divergent groups of people in a way which is neutral to their prejudice, and capable of overcoming their subjectivism. (Lippmann 1922, 158-59)

Chomsky couldn't agree more. He believes that one doesn't need to be a rocket scientist to understand how the world works. When asked which part of his work will be discarded by later generations, he answered that one had to distinguish between his linguistics and social analysis. In the former, he said, he expects that virtually everything will be discarded. "If I still believed what I believed ten years ago, I would assume the field [of linguistics] was dead." In contrast, he thinks that the basic ways in which societies work are clearly understood, and that it is unlikely that new insights will emerge (Achbar and Wintonick 1992).

To Chomsky, social analysis is straightforward. People with power will defend their privileged position, for instance by exerting control over the means of communication. It is "imposed ignorance" or propaganda that impedes the public's understanding, not lack of interest or intelligence. The people who conduct foreign policy hail from the corporate elite or are beholden to it. They will act to accommodate the wishes of big business, not those of the general population. Concentration of power in the hands of a small moneyed elite is the problem. Radical democracy is preferable to the corporate-led democracy that currently exists in the US. Chomsky would argue that in such a system a moral president is a logical impossibility. For he or she would function in an environment that makes it impossible to act morally. A truly moral president, who would continually challenge corporate power, would likely soon pay the ultimate price. Chomsky is so much opposed to concentrated power that when asked what he would do if he himself was running for president, he answered: "I would tell people not to vote for me" (Achbar and Wintonick 1992).

In contrast, Lippmann's solution to the problem of the public entails experts guiding public opinion. In the public's own interest, of course. According to him, a ruling class should be installed that dedicates itself solely to public affairs, for the good of all. Bureaus of disinterested experts should make sure that the rulers have the right information on which to act. To Lippmann, politics is essentially a matter of professionalism and expertise, not of morality. He sees governing as an intricate task that, especially in a complex society, can only be performed by what Chomsky calls the new mandarins, by technocratic experts. Thinkers on democracy traditionally assumed that "the art of government [is] a natural endowment," writes Lippmann: "The democrats had to insist that the free man [*sic*] was a legislator and administrator by nature." But this is a fallacy, contends Lippmann. It is obviously wrong to believe that "all men [*sic*] are reasonable all the time, or educated, or informed..." People "do not always know their

own interests," and "all men [*sic*] are not equally fitted to govern" (Lippmann 1922, 105).

Lippmann takes an absolutist position. Because men are *not always* reasonable, well-educated or informed, he argues, they *generally* cannot be trusted to play a significant part in the public arena. Lippmann attacks democratic thinkers for assuming that The People have some magical ability to govern. Lippmann erects a man of straw and chops him down. He is right, but beside the point. Chomsky would not contend that the popular will is always or even almost always right. But he would argue that ordinary people are very much capable of being right, provided they can access solid, relevant information. As they do not like unnecessary bloodshed they will, on the whole, decide on moral policies. Especially in a complex, modern society, counters Lippmann, people cannot possibly develop a sound opinion on all public issues. Lippmann has a point of course. The omni-competent citizen is indeed an illusion. Even in ideal circumstances, some people will have little understanding of some crucial issues facing the nation. But that is not a fatal argument against democracy.

To Chomsky, Lippmann's solution is an obvious and proven recipe for disaster. The scientists and social scientists who in the course of the 20th century in the US gained more and more influence over government decision making, the new mandarins, are the problem, not the solution. "In no small measure, the Vietnam War was designed and executed by these new mandarins, and it testifies to the concept of humanity and civilization they are likely to bring to the exercise of power" (Chomsky 2002, 26). In short, argues Chomsky, history has shown that the new mandarins have no compunction about assisting the US government in brutally repressing what he and Herman ironically call "unworthy victims," namely the millions of people, often of color, poor and living abroad, whose lives pose an obstacle to the exercise of American power and are therefore destroyed, without anyone, including the new mandarins, batting an eye.

Lippmann, hero-worshipper

To Lippmann, then, the public in a democracy should stay a public, in the sense of mere spectators. Lippmann's view of the public was, of course, informed by his own experiences. World War I played a pivotal role in his conversion from a socialist to the elitist and detached observer he became in *Public Opinion* (1922) and *mutatis mutandis* in *The Phantom Public* (1927). Lippmann's own work as a propagandist in The Great War showed him how easy it is to delude the public. American President Woodrow Wilson got re-elected in 1916 on the slogan "he kept us out of the war." Then the biggest systematic propaganda effort to that date won the war for people's minds. It convinced a large section of the American people, and virtually all the prominent intellectuals, that the US needed to enter the war, "to make the world safe for democracy," in Wilson's immortal phrase. The propagandists,

helped along by unexpected events like the Russian Revolution, succeeded in changing the American people's mind on a very important issue. All in a short time-span.

It is interesting that Lippmann drew the lesson from WWI that he did, as one can easily imagine drawing a completely different lesson. For it were the intellectuals, the experts, including Lippmann himself, who fooled, first themselves, and then the people, who initially did not want to go to war. Lippmann "found it easier to blame Wilson than to accept his own complicity in believing that an imperialist war could be transformed into a democratic crusade," writes his biographer Ronald Steel.

It was not Wilson who led Lippmann into war. Rather, it was Lippmann who found, first in morals, then in strategy, the arguments to persuade Wilson that American entry was necessary. In blaming the 'liberals' when it all went sour, and even praising the conservatives, he tried to exonerate himself. (Steel 1980, 165-66).

Although not a sufficient explanation in itself, it seems relevant that from a young age Lippmann looked for heroes, perhaps to compensate for having a passive father. As a boy, he was, in his own words, "an unqualified hero-worshiper" of Theodore Roosevelt. Steel comments that:

Lippmann never lost his admiration for men of daring and determination... In men like Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, later in Winston Churchill and Charles de Gaulle, he saw leaders who could express the inarticulate needs of their people, help them subdue un-nameable fears and paralyzing doubts. (Steel 1980, 4)

Indeed, Lippmann ...

continued to look for men who could see beyond the 'bogey' and 'constructed evils,' for great leaders who could direct the passions of lonely men in crowds and guide them toward higher paths. From the time he was a child he sought out these men. (Steel 1980, 5)

One might speculate that Lippmann tried to subdue his own fear of the world, which during his lifetime became so much bigger and impersonal, by placing trust in authority figures. In that sense he was a child of his times, as illustrated by the contemporary rise of Italian and German fascism. The psychoanalyst and member of the Frankfurt School, Erich Fromm (1941) might well have diagnosed him as someone who tried to "escape from freedom," in other words from responsibility, by looking to strong leaders to take control. Perhaps he believed that people were incapable of taking responsibility because in some fundamental way he himself was incapable in that sense.

As an aside: both Lippmann and Chomsky grew up in a Jewish household. They both encountered prejudice against Jews. Lippmann was ineligible to join certain social clubs while attending Harvard. Perhaps this experience was a factor in his short involvement with socialism. Because of his Jewish background and the exclusion he experienced, he at one point identified with the socially downtrodden. But eventually his desire to conform and get access to the world's movers and shakers won out and he neglected his Jewish background, following the example of his parents (Steel 1980, 186). Chomsky's parents were hardly true believers, but they did observe the Jewish rituals. More importantly, the milieu that Chomsky grew up in was defined by the misery caused by the Great Depression and included many working-class leftists. He gravitated towards them, instead of to "strong men" (Barsky 1997).

A fundamental difference between Chomsky and Lippmann, then, is that the former always identified with the mass of ordinary people, especially victims of abuse of power. Chomsky has told the story that as a kid, he saw a "fat kid that everyone made fun of" being beaten up, and that he did nothing. Afterwards he felt ashamed. "That is a feeling that has stayed with me, that you have to stick up for the underdog" (Achbar and Wintonick 1992).

Rationalism and public opinion

Lippmann was, like Chomsky, a rationalist. But, in Chomsky's words, Lippmann believed that "rationalism belongs to the cool observer," not the participant. Chomsky, on the other hand, believes in "Cartesian common sense," in the ability of normal people to see through deceit. Chomsky's work in linguistics, he claims, has made him appreciate the creativity that all users of language are capable of (Achbar and Wintonick 1992).

Therefore, his own academic work has not had the effect of coming to despise 'ordinary people.' Whereas Lippmann states that rationality belongs to the cool observer, Chomsky holds that the powerless are more moral than the powerful. To Chomsky, power corrupts; therefore, it should be spread out as much as possible throughout society. The essence of democracy, to him, is that people are put in a position in which they can exert meaningful control over their direct surroundings, that is, over their places of work and, through some system of representation, over the state, if the latter should be retained at all. To Chomsky, the 'experts' are often more deluded than the people, as they have internalized the values and opinions – for instance the dogma that US foreign policy is essentially a force for good in the world – that they 'must' hold if they are to retain their privileged positions.

Both of them note that the Founding Fathers of the American Republic were not as democratically-minded as propaganda would have us believe. Lippmann writes:

Not only were [they] consciously opposed to the democratic spirit of the time, feeling, as Madison

said, that 'democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention,' but within the national frontiers they were determined to offset as far as they could the ideal of self-governing communities in self-contained environments. (Lippmann 1922, 113)

Chomsky writes:

James Madison held that power must be delegated to 'the wealth of the nation,' 'the more capable set of men,' who understand that the role of government is 'to protect the minority of the opulent against the majority.' Pre-capitalist in his worldview, Madison had faith that the 'enlightened Statesman' and 'benevolent philosopher' who were to exercise power would 'discern the true interest of their country' and guard the public interest against the 'mischief' of democratic majorities. (Chomsky 2004, 7)

Both Chomsky and Lippmann see public opinion as the central problem of democracy. Chomsky calls it "the planet's second superpower," after of course the US government (Chomsky 2004, 235). Unlike Lippmann, Chomsky is an optimist. In certain respects, western societies have gotten much more humane over the last half a century: "One very promising development is the slow evolution of a human rights culture among the general population.... One encouraging feature has been a greatly heightened concern for civil and human rights, including rights of minorities, women, and future generations." These developments took place in spite of, not because of, elites. "Over the course of modern history, there have been significant gains in human rights and democratic control of some sectors of life. These have rarely been the gift of enlightened leaders. They have typically been imposed on states and other power centers by popular struggle" (Chomsky 2004, 235-36).

These developments show that democracy is a deep-rooted value in humans, for the corporate and state pressures that work against it are enormous. People recognize that the prevailing system does not work in their interests or even reflects their concerns. They therefore feel powerless. They realize that

What remains of democracy is largely the right to choose among commodities. Business leaders have long explained the need to impose on the population a 'philosophy of futility' and 'lack of purpose in life' to 'concentrate human attention on the more superficial things that comprise much of fashionable consumption.' Deluged by such propaganda from infancy, people may then accept their meaningless and subordinate lives and forget ridiculous ideas about managing their own affairs. They may abandon their fate to corporate managers and the PR industry and, in the political realm, to the self-described 'intelligent minorities' who serve and administer power. (Chomsky 2004, 139)

In his discussion of democracy Lippmann makes a basic error. He assumes that a democracy is a democracy is a democracy, whereas Chomsky would argue that past democracies mostly failed to live up to their ideals because they were not democratic enough.

Commercial media

Chomsky plausibly contends that the public's lack of interest and passivity are not congenital but are, to a large extent, responses to its subordinate position in society and the seemingly unassailable dominance of capitalism and state institutions. Chomsky argues that, in the words of John Milton, "those who have put out the eyes of the people reproach them for their blindness." He sees Lippmann as a case in point (Achbar and Wintonick 1992). For Lippmann blames people's faults, including their lack of political engagement, on their supposed nature. For example, Lippmann contends that newspaper readers are not willing to pay a substantial price for the news. "Nobody thinks for a moment that he ought to pay for his newspaper. 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." Lippmann thus sees the public as consisting of calculating consumers who refuse to pay for truth. He never wonders to what extent the calculating newspaper reader is a creation of capitalism, as opposed to its justification (Lippmann 1922, 130).

Chomsky and Lippmann agree that the press does not perform its democratic function well and that the people are ill-informed. Again, Lippmann blames the public. "The real problem is that the readers of a newspaper, unaccustomed to paying the cost of news-gathering, can be capitalized only by turning them into circulation that can be sold to manufacturers and merchants" (Lippmann 1922, 131). He discounts the influence advertisers have on the content of the mass media. In a footnote, he cites Adolph S. Ochs, who bought the *New York Times* in 1896 and transformed it into a prominent paper: "It may seem like a contradiction (yet it is the truth) to assert: the greater the number of advertisers, the less influence they are individually able to exercise with the publisher" (Lippmann 1922, 132-33).

This is true, but Lippmann does not take into account that a big newspaper that depends on advertisers cannot consistently take positions that offend advertisers as a group. A paper that denounces capitalism as an inhumane system, for instance, will go bankrupt quickly because no advertiser will want to advertise in it. And the public that grows up with an all-capitalist press, where will it encounter the intellectual tools to challenge the status quo? One of the most insightful observations that Lippmann makes in *Public Opinion* is that the public is quite able to judge which of two debating experts has the better of the argument, but that it is helpless with regard to the not-addressed assumptions which are held by both debaters. Here Lippmann foreshadows a point often made by Chomsky. The commercial media restrict the public

debate to mainstream political positions, which are different from each other but nonetheless hold assumptions in common. Because these are not brought out in the open they become deeply entrenched in the public's mind.

That the capitalist nature of the press is not the main cause of the poor quality of the press is, according to Lippmann, proven by the 'fact' that the anti-capitalist press is not better than the capitalist press. "If you are going to blame 'capitalism' for the faults of the press, you are compelled to prove that those faults do not exist except where capitalism controls." He chides socialist journalist Upton Sinclair for blaming the faults of the press on its capitalist nature.

One would have supposed that the inability to take any non-capitalist paper as a model of truthfulness and competence would have caused Mr. Sinclair, and those who agree with him, to look somewhat more critically at their assumptions. They would have asked themselves, for example, where is the fair body of truth, that Big Business prostitutes, but anti-Big Business does not seem to obtain? (Lippmann 1922, 137)

Lippmann is not convincing on this point. An anti-capitalist newspaper is not necessarily a good paper. It is bound to lack money, the editors might not be professionals but volunteers, etc. Therefore one cannot take the lack of quality of 'the' anti-capitalist press as conclusive proof that the capitalist nature of a paper does not influence it in a negative manner. To Lippmann, the problem of the press lies in the 'nature of news':

The news is an account of the overt phases [*of an issue*] that are interesting, and the pressure on the newspaper to adhere to this routine comes from many sides. It comes from the economy of noting only a stereotyped phase of a situation. It comes from the difficulty of finding journalists who can see what they have not learned to see. It comes from the almost unavoidable difficulty of finding sufficient space in which even the best journalist can make plausible an unconventional view. It comes from the economic necessity of interesting the reader quickly, and the economic risk involved in not interesting him at all, or of offending him by unexpected news insufficiently or clumsily described. (Lippmann 1922, 142)

Yet again Lippmann proclaims the current state of affairs, in this case how news is defined, as the natural and unchanging one. Lippmann, in short, was incapable of looking beyond the ideological boundaries of his own society. Or rather, of the part of society that he identified with.

Conclusion: the humane view

Chomsky and Lippmann both realize that a lot is wrong with the democratic system as it exists, but they put the blame on

different actors. Lippmann blames the fickle public and warns of an excess of democracy, whereas Chomsky contends that the problem is a lack of democracy. Lippmann identifies with the powerful and Chomsky with the powerless. They differ widely in their view on the complexity of reality. Chomsky holds that one does not need to be a qualified expert, as shown for instance by having a PhD in political science from, say, Yale, to be able to decide which political course of action is sound.

People are fully capable of "intellectual self-defense," though, in part because of the barrage of propaganda they have been exposed to since childhood, they could often use some help with developing or rather rediscovering this skill (Achbar and Wintonick 1992). Lippmann on the other hand thinks that many social problems are complex in the sense that they require much specialist knowledge to solve; therefore governments should rely on experts. To him, politics is a profession, whereas to Chomsky politics is essentially a matter of values.

Although Lippmann correctly points to weaknesses in the system of democracy and some unavoidable issues with the representation of events, for instance in the press, he is unconvincing in his solution. There is, taking history into account, no convincing case to be made that elites will do a better job than 'the people.' Lippmann's own experiences in WWI could have shown him that. He saw what he wanted to see and defined first and then looked. As we all do, to a certain extent.

The least one can say for Chomsky's position is that it is more optimistic, more appealing. To what extent it is actually accurate remains to be seen. But it is a more liberating point of view; it gives one the impression that one can make a difference. Chomsky's position makes change possible; Lippmann's precludes it at the outset. If we regard 'the public' as a screen onto which Chomsky and Lippmann project their own personalities, then Chomsky definitely seems to be the more humane of the two.

Constructive change will only happen if people believe it can. Therefore, a positive view of human nature must by definition underlie all efforts at structural societal changes, even if that view cannot be empirically substantiated. As Robert McChesney (1999) writes, the biggest lie disseminated by the mass media has been making people believe that there is no other way than the known one, the status quo. Indeed, one of the psychological defenses that for instance American college students routinely put up when confronted with the large amount of critical research on the structural biases of a commercial media system, is asserting that an alternative system will never work – because people will never be prepared to pay for their news or because of a host of other reasons that usually entail negative perceptions of human nature, that is, of the public. It is therefore imperative that the inadequacies of the liberal worldview, including its elitist notion of the public, are clearly communicated in communication scholarship and teaching.

Tabe Bergman is an assistant professor in journalism and media at the Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University in Suzhou, China. He can be reached at academia.edu.

References

- Achbar, Mark and Peter Wintonick. 1992. *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media/Necessary Illusions*. New York: Zeitgeist Films Ltd.
- Barsky, Robert. 1997. *Noam Chomsky: A Life of Dissent*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Boyd-Barrett, Oliver. 2004. "Judith Miller, *The New York Times*, and the Propaganda Model." *Journalism Studies* 5(4): 435-449.
- Carey, Alex. 1997. *Taking the Risk out of Democracy*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Chomsky, Noam. 2002. *American Power and the New Mandarins*. New York: The New Press.
- Chomsky, Noam. 2004. *Hegemony or Survival*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Dewey, John. 2012 [1927]. *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Fromm, Erich. 1941. *Escape from Freedom*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Herman, Edward S. and Noam Chomsky. 1988. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Klaehn, Jeffery, Godler, Yigal, Mullen, Andrew, Broudy, Daniel, Pedro-Carañana, Joan, Mills, Tom and Florian Zollmann. 2018. "The Propaganda Model and Black Boxes?" *Media Theory*. Available at: <http://mediatheoryjournal.org/discussion-the-propaganda-model-and-black-boxes/>
- Le Bon, Gustave. 2001 [1896]. *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*. Kitchener: Batoche Books.
- Lippmann, Walter. 1922. *Public Opinion*. Project Gutenberg Ebook.
- Lippmann, Walter. 1927 [1993]. *The Phantom Public*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.
- McChesney, Robert W. 1999. *Rich Media, Poor Democracy*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Ortega Y Gasset, José. 1964 [1930]. *The Revolt of the Masses*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Orwell, George. 2003 [1948]. *1984*. New York: Plume.
- Smith, Neil and Nicholas Allott. 2016. *Chomsky: Ideas and Ideals*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Steel, Ronald. 1980. *Walter Lippmann and the American Century*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.