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Salter, A. B. (1933). Walter Lippmann's contribution to an understanding of public opinion [University of Iowa]. <https://doi.org/10.17077/etd.fdbz7gpx>

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WALTER LIPPMANN'S CONTRIBUTION TO AN UNDERSTANDING  
OF PUBLIC OPINION

by

Alice B. Salter

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts, in the department  
of Sociology, in the Graduate College  
of the State University of  
Iowa

June, 1932

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# Walter Lippmann's Contribution to an Understanding of Public Opinion

## Introduction

It is generally conceded by writers on sociological and political subjects that there is more or less ambiguity in the use of the term "Public Opinion." A perusal of the literature yields almost as many definitions of the term as there are writers who use it. This fact would seem to indicate a need for its clarification.

Many, if not most, of the standard definitions hold public opinion to be in the nature of a judgment, falling short of a demonstration but resulting from rational processes of public discussion. Giddings thinks of public opinion as "judgment of a self-conscious community upon any subject of general interest."<sup>1</sup> Dicey states that public opinion is the result of

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1. Giddings, F. H., The Principles of Sociology, New York, The Macmillan Company, 1913, p. 138

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"speculative views held by the mass of people as to the alteration or improvement of their institutions."<sup>2</sup> King defines pub-

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2. Dicey, A. V., Lectures on the Relation between Law and Public Opinion in England during the Nineteenth Century, New York, The Macmillan Company, 1926, p. 3

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lic opinion as the "social judgment reached upon a question of general or civic import after conscious rational public discussion."<sup>3</sup> Lowell also imports into the term an element of ration-

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3. King, Clyde, quoted in Graves, W. B., Readings in Public Opinion, New York, Appleton, 1928, p. xxiii

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2.1  
ality, although he does not think that the opinion need be rationally held by any given individual or group of individuals; he defines an opinion as "the acceptance of one among two or more inconsistent views which are capable of being accepted by a rational mind as true," and public opinion as "an opinion accepted by a considerable number of men."<sup>4</sup> In all these defini-

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4. Lowell, A. L. Public Opinion in War and Peace, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1936, p. 13

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tions public opinion involves discussion and, finally, judgment.

Recent attempts to clarify the term place less emphasis upon thought and discussion, stressing as well the sentimental or attitudinal factors. Lowell Juillard Carr, in his article, "Public Opinion as a Dynamic Concept," has brought together various definitions and interpretations. He concludes that most writers conceive the term to mean the content of men's minds considered collectively. He says, however, that "such usage ignores the phenomena of the psycho-social processes of which the content is a result, or at least a momentary configuration,"<sup>5</sup>

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5. Carr, Lowell Juillard, "Public Opinion as a Dynamic Concept," Sociology and Social Research, XIII, 1928-29, pp. 18-29

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and he suggests that investigators equipped with dynamic rather than static categories of observation take the field.

Virginia Rankin Sedman states: "In the various approaches to the subject of public opinion, we find an impressive confusion of interpretations which defy any attempt to deal with it as a uniformly defined entity."<sup>6</sup> She, too, brings together

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6. Sedman, Virginia Rankin, "Some Interpretations of Public Opinion," Social Forces, X, March, 1932, pp. 339-350

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numerous definitions and theories. From an analysis of such definitions and theories she has compiled a definition which she hopes may be all inclusive--or perhaps exclusive--inasmuch as it does not confuse the term with such concepts as public judgment, consensus of opinion, popular impression, public sentiment, and public action. She defines public opinion as "an active or latent force derived from a composite of individual thoughts, sentiments, and impressions, which composite is weighted by the varying degrees of influence and aggressiveness of the separate opinions within the aggregate."<sup>7</sup>

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7. Ibid., p. 348

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Differences exist not only in regard to the definition of the term, but also in regard to the formation and function of public opinion. Emory S. Bogardus thinks that public opinion is founded upon culture traits. He says, "The basis of public opinion is an a priori culture or mores stage, highly potential, but not in motion. In a very real sense the groundwork of public opinion is the mores, characterized by definite convictions, accepted fully, but not often analyzed."<sup>8</sup> William Gaver finds

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8. Bogardus, Emory S., "Public Opinion as a Social Force," Race Reactions, Social Forces, VIII, September, 1929, pp. 102-5

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that public opinion is formed according to "our belief as to what our feelings and opinions ought to be," that "society commits itself to many propositions that are by no means representative of the way people actually think and feel."<sup>9</sup> Norman

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9. Gaver, William, "Credo at Work," Scribner's Magazine, 82, July-December, 1927, p. 618

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Meier contends that public opinion is founded upon the basis of suggestion, imitation, and propaganda.<sup>10</sup> Some writers con-

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10. Meier, Norman C., "Motives in Voting," American Journal of Sociology, 31, July, 1925-May, 1926, p. 203

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ceive the function of public opinion to be spasmodic, active only in crises; others see public opinion functioning continuously and permanently.

Walter J. Millard, in addressing a meeting of the National Municipal League in Pittsburgh in November, 1925, referred to Walter Lippmann's concept of the stereotype as the greatest contribution to our thinking in the social sciences that had been made during the last generation.<sup>11</sup> This concept, as developed

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11. Millard, Walter J., quoted in Graves, W. B., Readings in Public Opinion, p. 3

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in Lippmann's writing, throws considerable light upon the nature and functioning of public opinion and upon the processes incident to its control. Whether or not students of public affairs, and of public opinion as a factor in these affairs, agree with Millard in his use of the superlative, it is evident from a study of the writing of these students that the majority regard Lippmann with respect. It may be profitable, therefore, to bring together all of Lippmann's writings and, by careful analysis, to discover his conception of the nature of opinion, the processes of its formation, and the role that it plays, and may play, in modern society.

Perhaps no writer has had a better opportunity to study public opinion, its nature, formation, and function than has

Walter Lippmann. He has been a friend of political leaders; Captain in the Military Intelligence Division of the Army, so that he might advise the Army on behalf of Newton D. Baker with regard to political propaganda against the German Army; associated with Frank Cobb, Editor of the New York World, in preparing an interpretation of President Wilson's Fourteen Points; a constant contributor to various magazines and newspapers; editor of the New Republic and in charge of the editorial page of the New York World; and the author of many books. But he also saw the working of politics from the inside, and for several months he was secretary to His Honor, the Mayor of Schenectady.

He is intensely interested in American political life and in everything that pertains to it. Notwithstanding his active interest in and connection with practical affairs, he has succeeded in maintaining the detached, objective view of the scholar and has always been willing to be convinced by the facts, even when such facts are contrary to his previous ideas. He is a keen observer and a brilliant writer--and much of his writing deals directly or indirectly with the subject of public opinion.



## Part I

### The Nature of Public Opinion

Lippmann observes that we know only indirectly the environment in which we live. Whatever seems to us to be a true picture, we treat as the environment itself. One cannot have any feeling about an event he does not experience unless that feeling is aroused by a mental image of that event. Living in an environment as wide and as diversified as ours, knowledge of most events is made up largely of images. Therefore, there exists a triangular relationship between the scene of action, the human picture of the scene, and the response to the picture working itself out upon the scene of action. There is inserted between man and the real environment a pseudo-environment. It is to this pseudo-environment that his response is made. The confusion which frequently results is due to the fact that the response to the pseudo-environment is made in the real environment.

The world beyond the reach of an individual becomes no less his world because he has imaged what the unreachable part must be. His senses cannot penetrate to all parts of the world, therefore it is in his mind that he sees, touches, smells, hears, and remembers. The pictures which are formed in his mind become to him trustworthy pictures of the world beyond his reach.

This distinction between the "pictures in our heads" and the affairs of the "world outside" is basic to Lippmann's definition of public opinion, as well as to his theory of the

formation and control of opinion. Public affairs, says Lippmann, are "those features of the world outside which have to do with the behavior of other human beings, insofar as that behavior touches ours, is dependent upon us, or interesting to us. The pictures inside of the heads of these human beings, the pictures of themselves, of others, of their needs, purposes and relationships, are their public opinions. Those pictures which are acted upon by groups of people, or by individuals acting in the name of groups, are Public Opinion with capital letters."<sup>12</sup>

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12. Lippmann, Walter, Public Opinion, New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1922, p. 13

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Various factors affect the ease and accuracy with which these pictures are formed. Censorship stands between the individual and the real environment; the pseudo-environment is formed in many cases by what the censor permits to trickle through. Add to censorship, a standard of secrecy which is frequently imposed and accepted, and the pictures of public affairs become still further removed from the affairs themselves. The individual may not observe the event, and, since the version of it which he is permitted to see or to hear has been pruned before it is presented to him, the picture he has bears little resemblance to the thing itself. But if censorship and secrecy were removed, the individual would still be handicapped, for he has little chance for contact. Lack of communication, the size of a man's income, the social set into which he is born tend to determine what he shall see of

the outside world and how he shall see it. A large body of fact never reaches him at all, or at best, very slowly.

One may be conscious of his inability to understand the world outside, but the time which he may spend in an attempt at understanding is limited. If all the affairs of a particular country were related in detail, accurately, through the newspapers of that country, only a small portion of the newspapers in which the affairs were so recorded could be read. Not only do censorship and privacy at the source and physical and social barriers at the receiving end tend to limit the ease with which the pseudo-environment is built up, but lack of attention, poverty of language, the fact that we do not see and then define, but define and then see--all tend to make the pseudo-environment different from the real environment. Lippmann says that we tend to pick out what our culture has already defined for us and "we tend to perceive that which we have picked out, in the form of stereotypes, for us by our culture."<sup>13</sup> Even trained observers fail, frequently, to re-

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13. Ibid., p. 81

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cord clearly and accurately. They see, not the particular happening, but a composite of all similar happenings that they have ever seen.

The triangular relationship exists in regard to persons as well as to other parts of the environment. We label groups from an inaccurate knowledge of one individual. Thus, we know a person with certain characteristics. This person claims to

be an atheist. All other persons with the same characteristics become to us atheists, or all atheists are thought to have the same characteristics. We talk glibly about the menace of the agitator, because one self-confessed agitator is a menace. Characteristics of one individual become the basic characteristics of a group. Abstract terms come to be stereotyped and such words as "progress," "perfection," mean all that is good, while "imperialistic" means all that is bad. Lippmann says it is often a puzzle to know just how a popular idea gets into circulation. "The idea of greatness has been put into such extensive circulation that it has become one of the sacred cows of the American public thinking."<sup>14</sup> The deepest of all stereo-

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14. Lippmann, Walter, Men of Destiny, New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1928, p. 185

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types is that which assumes that inanimate or collective things have the attributes of human beings. We let the name of "England" come to mean all the people of England, and "John Bull" to stand for people and country combined.

It is true that stereotypes result in a great economy of effort and a saving of time. They are "ordered, more or less consistent pictures of the world to which our habits, our tastes, our capacities, our comforts, and our hopes have adjusted themselves. They may not be a complete picture of the world, but they are a picture of a possible world to which we are adapted. In that world, people and things have their well-known places, and do certain expected things. We feel at home

there. We fit in. We are members. We know the way around."<sup>15</sup>

15. Public Opinion, p. 95

The private citizen, according to Lippmann, lives in a world which he cannot see, does not understand, and is unable to direct. "He does not understand his own part in public affairs, nor know for certain that he has a part. He does not, cannot, have opinions on all public affairs. First of all, he is ignorant that many events are taking place and even if he knew they were happening, he cannot know why."<sup>16</sup> These citizens

16. Lippmann, Walter, The Phantom Public, New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1925, p. 14

are expected to exert a directing force in public affairs. According to popular belief, they make up the public.

John Dewey says that Walter Lippmann's estimate of the public is condensed in the title of one of his books, The Phantom Public. Lippmann does not advocate the theory that there is no public, or that it is the public which is the phantom, says Dewey, but he thinks that the public of democratic ideas is the phantom. Lippmann sees not one public, but many publics, which "although volatile, elusive, ignorant, and shy may by appropriate means be caught, precipitated, formed and deformed, and be induced occasionally to appear in public."<sup>17</sup>

17. Dewey, John, "Practical Democracy," New Republic, 45, November, 1925-February, 1926, p. 53

The public, composed of all citizens, and exerting a directing force in public affairs is, says Lippmann, "a mere phantom. It is an abstraction." The public is not a "fixed

body of individuals. It is merely those persons who are interested in an affair and can affect it only by supporting or opposing the actors."<sup>18</sup> Since his public has no fixed membership,

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18. Phantom Public, p. 77

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membership changing with the issue, the individual may be the actor in one affair and the spectator in another. If interest is at the basis of participation, the individual may participate in many publics.

These publics may take the form of concentric circles. A small group within the inside circle directs the action; another group a little farther from the center is interested, but not to such an extent, and so on until the disinterested or uninterested rank and file is reached.

Lippmann remarks that the public has been criticized as being fickle, changing interests quickly, or being diverted from one interest to another easily. He says this is natural, for a great people is diverse, and, being diverse, cannot be expected to have one or the same interest. It does not have an interest in all the subjects of life, nor can it give itself to any one phase. Groups are inflexible. The members may change their minds individually, but the entire mass changes slowly.<sup>19</sup>

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19. Lippmann, Walter, Stakes of Diplomacy, New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1915, p. 30

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Every individual, at some time or other, is part of the public. He is part when he is seeking in a crisis to know the

truth and when he is dealing with a party, sect, or class, "not as their attorney, not as their opponent, not as their censor or laureate, but as one seeking to learn from them, to draw out of them, and propose to them plans which employ in their most productive and harmonious form the energies of men."<sup>20</sup>

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20. Lippmann, Walter, "Unrest," New Republic, 20, November 12, 1919, p. 321

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The public is made up of those who align themselves on the side of one of the actors. It is made up of those who take a definite position in regard to the behavior of others. Any group that "seeks to control, or direct, the behavior of others by law or persuasion constitutes a public and their opinions as to how these others are to act are public opinions."<sup>21</sup> A public

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21. Phantom Public, p. 55

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in regard to a railroad strike may be the farmers who are served by the railroad, while the public in regard to a tariff on agricultural products may be the railroad men whose behavior is of interest to the farmers.

Lippmann insists that the will, the mind, and the voice of a great people are not the same as the will, the mind, and the voice of the individual. We delegate authority to one man, and have confidence in him, because we know that one man can negotiate, while many cannot. Masses of people cannot deal directly with one another. They must deal through a representative. This representative may think out a course of action, but it is impossible for the mass to think in unison. He may take into account what other persons think and feel, but the opinions he expresses are his notions of what most people would

like to have said. There are no minds but human minds. The idea that somehow there is to develop, or to be developed, a "collective mind" over and above individual minds is fallacious.

The nation, then, cannot be treated as an individual. It must rather be treated as a group of individuals. The thought of a nation is very different from the thought of an individual. "The nation has no eyes, ears, or mouth. Its 'will' is compounded of many wills, and when it speaks, it speaks through a person."<sup>22</sup> For a nation is, after all, a straggling and

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22. Stakes of Diplomacy, p. 27

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varied collection of people.

Public opinion does not assert itself except in a crisis. Differences of opinion must have been expressed, individuals must align themselves with leaders of the different factions, discussion must take place, and there must be satisfaction in the decision. When there is an issue, each side formulates its demands, expresses its interest, and calls that its sovereign will.

Lippmann does not think of public opinion as a conserving or creating force directing society to clearly conceived ends, making deliberately toward socialism or away from it, toward nationalism or away from it, toward any doctrinal goal. He sets no great store on what can be done by public opinion and the action of the masses. He conceives public opinion to be, he says, "not the voice of God, nor the voice of society, but the voice of the interested spectators of action."<sup>23</sup>



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23. Phantom Public, p. 197

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Lippmann's theory of public opinion puts its trust in the individuals most directly concerned. These individuals initiate, they administer, they settle. The public intervenes only in a crisis and then to make adjustment possible. His theory economizes the attention of "men as members of the public, and asks them to do as little as possible in matters where they can do nothing well." 24

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24. Ibid., p. 199

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## Part II

### The Formation of Public Opinion

Lippmann has a theory that the general opinions of large numbers of persons are almost certain to be vague and confused. He says, "action cannot be taken until these opinions are factored down, canalized, compressed, and made uniform. The making of one general will out of a multitude of general wishes is not an Hegelian mystery, as so many social philosophers have imagined, but an art well known to leaders, politicians, and steering committees."<sup>25</sup>

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25. Phantom Public, p. 47

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In an analysis of this process, Lippmann seems to recognize two kinds of opinions, those which are specific or direct and lead to immediate executive acts, and those which are general or indirect and lead to delegated, indirect, symbolic, intangible results. Specific opinions function only where the man has personal jurisdiction, but they lead to decision, to acts, while general opinions lead to a form of expression and do not result in executive acts except in cooperation with general opinions of many others.<sup>26</sup>

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26. Public Opinion, p. 47

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Public opinion, then, is manipulated. It does not spontaneously originate within a particular group, nor does it seem to grow without motivation by someone or some group. The inner circle, those vitally interested, have found it comparatively easy to manipulate and educate public opinion. Methods

of education and control vary according to the group and according to the leader. Writers seem to agree in regard to the instruments which are used in reaching the public, the most important of which is, perhaps, the press. Lippmann calls the newspaper the bible of democracy, out of which a people determines its conduct. The radio, motion pictures, telephone and telegraph, schools, churches take more or less important parts according to the particular public that is to be reached.

It is reasonable to suppose, therefore, that those who have access to these instruments will be the ones who have the most influence in the formation of public opinion. It is these persons whose work it is to arouse interest, to arrange for discussions. This interest, says Lippmann, may be created, not by preaching, but by making the subject of public opinion a part of the business of life.<sup>27</sup>

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27. Stakes of Diplomacy, p. 198

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That is all very well, but there must be some way in which the subject may be made a part of the business of life, a way in which great numbers of people feeling privately on so many questions, develop a common thought. Lippmann says that it does not take an oversoul to crystallize out from the mass certain settled aims. This is done during every political campaign. The attention of the people is first centered on some symbol which is not objectionable to any individual, or to the different factions. This focusing point must be something which brings

out practically the same response in all persons, arousing interest, and concentrating that interest. While this may not be an "Hegelian mystery," it is evident that a certain type of leadership is needed to sense out the feeling of the public and to analyze movements. The leaders must be recognized by the mass as having authority. They may be school officials, church officials, politicians, or others in more or less conspicuous positions. They must, certainly, have the confidence of the public and they must be believed when they attempt an interpretation of the environment to those who are not in touch with it.

It seems comparatively easy to trust those who are in the public eye, who are political leaders. Thus, the party organization becomes the source of information. Lippmann says that the reason for the party machine is not the "perversity of human nature. It is that out of the private notions of any group no common idea emerges by itself."<sup>28</sup> A public, as such,

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28. Public Opinion, p. 329

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may refuse to buy if prices are too high, or to work if wages are too low, or migrate, or boycott, or in other ways establish the right to joint control. It cannot, however, exercise that control except through some form of organization.

The number of times that we, as a public, consciously decide anything about events beyond our reach is very small.

Since there are few practical issues, the habit of making decisions is not formulated. The fact of indecision would be more evident, says Lippmann, were it not that most information, when it reaches us, carries with it an aura of suggestion as to how we ought to feel about the news. We seek through the newspaper until we find that suggestion, and until we do find it, we are uncertain where we stand. We must have facts formulated so that we may say "Yes" or "No" in regard to them. A choice must be presented, and the choice must be connected with individual opinion by the transfer of interest through the symbols.<sup>29</sup>

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29. Public Opinion, p. 330

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It is the leader's function to initiate programs, for these programs do not initiate themselves in a mass of minds. A mass cannot think. Thinking, to Lippmann, is the function of an organism and a mass is not an organism. The mass is, however, constantly exposed to suggestion and from these suggestions it gets an idea how to act. The mass hears reports already stereotyped to a certain behavior pattern, and it acts upon such reports.<sup>30</sup>

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30. Ibid., pp. 243-44

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If it were possible to eliminate all suggestion and leading, one might find a mass exposed to stimuli developing responses that would not be vastly dissimilar. A certain group would feel enough alike on the question before it is classified

as a group. Those in the group who were not settled in their intentions and opinions would tend to feel decisively when opinions had been openly expressed. Leaders watch for such reactions, and when a new policy is to be launched, each leader makes a bid for community of feeling. His first move is to vocalize what he considers to be the prevailing opinion of the masses. He ingratiates himself with the audience, he proves his trustworthiness, and he catches the interest of those not so settled in their minds. He is looked upon as the one to start a plan of action. This may be done by connecting his plan with the ideas already expressed by the crowd, by subscribing to the accepted symbols. He need not explain the substance of his program.

Generally, however, a leader who is astute and clever will seek some element of consent. He will take certain persons of the mass into his confidence, enough into his confidence to make them feel that they have taken part in the plan. The entire mass will not be able to appreciate the choices set forth by the leaders, for the leaders have the advantage in every respect. They have sources of information not open to the public in general. They are in a position to meet the most important people. They have the responsibility. They can more easily secure attention, and they almost always assume a convincing tone. They have control over the facts, and they decide which facts shall be presented to the public and how they

shall be presented. It is true that leaders secure consent, out they manipulate that consent, and while the public seems to make the decision, it is a decision guided by a few.

That Lippmann feels that public opinion is formed by consciously directed action of vitally interested persons or groups is evident. Occasionally he speaks of public opinion flaring up spasmodically, as: "The aroused public which the Commission asks for cannot be held if all it has to fix upon is an elaborate series of taboos. Sensational discipline will often make the public flare up spasmodically."<sup>31</sup> Such

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31. Lippmann, Walter, A Preface to Politics, New York, The Macmillan Company, 1913, p. 145

reference is infrequent, and it is to be doubted if public opinion in the sense in which he uses the term ordinarily is to be considered as functioning in such instances. Most frequently we find reference to the groups which control, to the "business leaders, the makers of opinion," to "those interested groups, financial groups, traders, intellectuals which severally control public opinion." He says that Signor Mussolini most desires the approval of the educated classes, who, in the long run, make public opinion, who will write the history books about him and deliver the verdict upon him. Again, "Above all it (The League) enables any government in the League to arouse the public opinion of the world wherever a condition appears which threatens the peace."<sup>32</sup> And, placing responsibility in

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32. Lippmann, Walter, The Political Scene, (A Supplement to the New Republic, 18, March 22, 1919, Part II, p. 8)

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the hands of the few, he remarks that the time has come when those who lead opinion will have to make up their minds what they propose to do as revolutionary. He states that the most dangerous sort of unrest is that which prevails among the leaders of the community, among those who exercise the force of the state and set the temper of debate.<sup>33</sup>

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33. "Unrest," New Republic, 20, November 18, 1920, p. 315

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Lippmann often asserts that the administration has an opportunity to affect public debate and public judgment. That advantage of such an opportunity is not utilized is pointed out in many of his editorials and magazine articles. Writing in the New York Tribune, he says, "Next week Congress will meet. The administration has had nine months of freedom from congressional criticism, nine months in which to mold a public opinion which would support measures needed to meet the world crisis. Is there any evidence that it has succeeded in aligning a public opinion behind it on which it can count during the critical months ahead." He feels that such evidence is lacking, that the prevailing opinion in Washington at the time he wrote was exactly what it had been nine months previous, that the administration could take no far reaching steps because it was not sure of the support of public opinion. For more than two years the administration has been working with other powers, but it has never once explained its work to the public. It, the administration, does not know whether it can



pledge the nation to any of the doctrines which it has been considering; it is waiting for some sign from a public which has never been instructed and informed. While the public waits for some sign from administrative officials, those same officials are treating the present uninstructed public opinion as final. This is a different attitude than the one taken by the government during the war crisis. Then, Lippmann says, the government conscripted public opinion. Officials goose-stepped it, taught it to stand at attention and salute.

Decisions in the modern state tend to be made by the interaction, not of Congress and the Executive, but of public opinion and the Executive. Public opinion, for this purpose, finds itself collected about special groups, a labor group, a farmer group. These groups conduct a continuous electioneering campaign upon the uninformed, exploitable public. Being special groups, they have special sources of information. Very frequently the information is simply manufactured to fit the need. It would seem, says Lippmann, that the sources of opinion must be carefully protected if the resulting public opinion is to be of value in guiding the acts of the executive.<sup>34</sup>

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34. Lippmann, Walter, Liberty and the News, New York, The Macmillan Company, 1920, p. 61

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The public is often poorly instructed, and the result is not all that leaders desire. Unless the cards are laid on the table, the ultimate good of any move, political or social, may not be realized. In writing of the Manchurian affair, Lippmann

says: "It is of the utmost importance that the implication of this resolution should be clearly understood, so that assuming that the resolution is adopted, public opinion through the world may be left in no doubt as to what has been achieved." He says, in writing of Grandi's visit, "Unless some way is found to clarify American opinions on this point, Grandi's mission may have the opposite effect." Lippmann is convinced that there is potential strength in a well-instructed public opinion. He seems to feel that this strength has, so far, not been tapped, that there are ways of getting the public to fall in line, to support important measures. The technique, so far, has been faulty. He says that perhaps too much reliance is placed on editors of leading papers and on editors of magazines which claim to reflect opinion.

Perhaps one other point may be mentioned in analyzing the factors which influence the formation of public opinion, as conceived by Walter Lippmann. He stresses the plurality of the person. Public opinion is formed by the self in the ascendancy--and no one self is always in the ascendancy. Those manipulating public opinion have to deal, not only with numerous individuals, but with individuals whose interests may tend in one direction at one time and in another direction at a future time.<sup>35</sup>

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35. Phantom Public, p. 161

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Codes have their place in the making of public opinion. Stereotypes which form the basis of our codes influence us in seeking

out facts and determines in what way we shall see them, and "in the making of public opinion, and in the present state of education, a public opinion is primarily a moralized and codified version of the facts."<sup>36</sup>

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36. Public Opinion, p. 125

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Perhaps the entire matter of the formation of public opinion, as far as lippmann's concept is concerned, is to be found in his statement: "My conclusion is that public opinion must be organized for the press if it is to be sound, not by the press as it is today."<sup>37</sup>

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37. Ibid., p. 32

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### Part III

#### The Function of Public Opinion

"The action of a public," says Lippmann, "is principally confined to an occasional intervention in affairs by means of an alignment of the force which a dominant section of that public can wield."<sup>38</sup>

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38. Phantom Public, p. 60

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What the public really does is to align itself for or against a proposal. It does not express its opinions. It cannot do so by simply answering "Yes" and "No." In saying that the popular will does not direct continuously, but intervenes only occasionally, we are advocating that the people themselves do not govern, but mobilize, as a majority, to support or to oppose the individuals who govern. The members of a public cannot possess the intimate knowledge of affairs that those who are within the inner circle possess. They cannot understand the fine points of the argument. They can but wait for some sign which will indicate behind which actor, which leader, to mobilize. They cannot anticipate the problem much before it has reached the crisis stage, nor do they mull over the problem when that stage is passed.

Public opinion is not a conserving or creating force, directing society to clearly conceived ends, or taking a deliberate stand toward any preconceived goal and then working consistently and unchecked toward that goal. It does not continuously direct

the affairs of the world. It is only when these affairs meet with a snag that public opinion intervenes, and then it does not "deal with the substance of the problem, or make technical decisions, or attempt to do justice, or impose a moral precept."<sup>39</sup>

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39. Phantom Public, p. 68

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It simply aligns men in such a way as to back those individuals who oppose the crisis.

It is Lippmann's theory that public opinion is a reserve of force operating only in periods of crisis. Public opinion in this role is an attempt to control the action of those who make up the "In" group by those who make up the "Out" group, to control those on the inside. The public's relation to a problem is always an external one. It takes the form of a vote, a boycott. The expression of opinion is of no importance even at the crisis point unless the action of those on the inside is influenced. Lippmann says it is the indirect relationship between public opinion and public affairs which must be considered if we, as students, are to understand the possibilities of public opinion.<sup>40</sup>

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40. Ibid., pp. 55-56

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It would seem that an election might express the direct opinion of a public. However, it is the election which determines the alignment to be made behind certain actors. The voter merely says that he will back the candidate who promises to do certain things. The candidate is not selected by the

public, as such. He is chosen by the party leaders, by the city factions. The result of general voting is to align the voters.

Lippmann does not concede that public opinion makes the law any more than it chooses the candidate. It does, he says, when the law is presented to it, either affirm or deny its worth. It does, by giving assent to certain candidates, say that this man shall make the law instead of that man. So long as the laws which are made operate smoothly and inoffensively, the public does not interfere. It is only when the power of certain persons to make the law has been challenged that the public intervenes.

If we depended upon the entire mass of people to make the law, we should be a nation without law. It is impossible for the public to govern directly. The only interest that the mass has in governing is to see that there are laws, that these laws function, and that when they cease to function, new laws are substituted. As a people, we are not interested in the law itself, but only in enforcing the law; in the maintenance of a regime of rule, contract, and custom; in "law," not in laws; in the method of law, not in the substance; in the sanctity of contract, not in a particular contract. The pressure which the public brings to bear through praise and blame, through votes, strikes, boycotts, or support can yield results only if it re-enforces the men who enforce an old rule or sponsor a new one.

The public does not consider any one system of rules sacred and cares only that some system be enforced. It does not interfere unless there is some question as to validity of the rules, as to enforcement, as to meaning. Then, it requires that certain objective tests be applied. The public is not a dispenser of law and morals, but a reserve force that may be called into use during the poor functioning of the existing laws and morals.<sup>41</sup>

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41. Ibid., pp. 104-8

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There is considerable talk about the education of the general public in order that there may be a dependable public opinion. Lippmann feels that it is in the elementary state schools that such education should logically start. It is impossible, he says, circumstances being as they are, to educate above the level of the prejudices of the whole state citizenry.<sup>42</sup> He

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42. Lippmann, Walter, American Inquisitors, New York, The Macmillan Company, 1928, p. 34

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says, further, that we cannot imagine that the trusts will drift naturally into the service of human life; the people can compel such service. But there will have to be an adjustment in thinking, and this adjustment will not come undirected.

That there is potency in an organized public opinion is evident in the weight it has with certain of the leading actors on the stage of public affairs. In his Men of Destiny, Lippmann says of William McAdoo: "He, of all men, has incomparably the

greatest sensibility to the prevailing winds of public opinion. He is organized by a remarkable sense of what the governing majority of voters wants and will receive." Of Herbert Hoover, he has this to say: "Hoover, lacking stimulation from the mass, advances opinions from a few stock ideas." Comparing the two, he says that McAdoo is less intricate personally, but infinitely more sensitive to the stimulus of popular feeling.<sup>43</sup>

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43. Men of Destiny, p. 118

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The popular feeling is that if one can secure a hearing in public opinion, the cause which he represents will be more certain of ultimate success. Lippmann tells us that organized labor spends large sums of money trying to enforce its will, but such efforts are generally unsuccessful because it does not have an opportunity to secure a genuine hearing in public opinion.<sup>44</sup>

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44. Liberty and the News, p. 103

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No one can work at his best, nor secure the best results if he knows that he is constantly having to fight public disfavor. The press, or rather those who control the press, are always on the alert for the approval or disapproval of different publics. Lippmann thinks that in the repression of the news no financial power is "one-tenth" so corrupting, so insidious, so hostile to originality and frank statement as the "fear of the public who reads the magazine. For one item suppressed out of respect for a railroad or a bank, nine are rejected because of the



prejudice of the public. This will anger the farmer, that will arouse the Catholics, another will shock the summer girl."<sup>45</sup>

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45. Preface to Politics, p. 196

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The public has a function. It must form methods of its own in controversies. It must conform to certain principles. It must confine the efforts of its members to a play which they can play, merely to an intervention which will result in an allaying of the disturbance and so let them, the members, go on with their own affairs.

## Part IV

### Tests

It has already been said that Lippmann feels that there is no question for the public unless there is doubt as to the validity of a rule, doubt about its meaning, its soundness, or the method of its application. When doubt exists, the public requires simple, objective tests to help it decide where it will enlist. These tests must answer two questions: Is the rule defective, and how shall the agency be recognized which is most likely to mend it?

Since the membership of the public is not fixed, changing with the issue, there is a drifting back and forth between the field where certain individuals are executives and the field where they are members of the public. There is confusion as to whether the attitudes of these individuals are public attitudes or private attitudes. The public point of view is hard to detect, it is confused by the presence of those persons who are working to shape opinion, to bend the rule in their favor while pretending, or even imagining, that they are interested only in the public good and in the existence of a workable rule. It is essential that this self-interested group be recognized and that its actions be discounted. The members of the self-interested group will not aid in the search. Therefore, it devolves upon the members of the public. They must insist on debate. They, the members of the public, will not

be able to decide the question on the merits of the arguments presented, but they will be watching the exposure of the self-interested group in the discussion. The debate will most frequently not lead to an answer to the question debated, but it will tend to expose the partisan group. This identification is the true purpose of the debate.<sup>46</sup>

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46. Phantom Public, p. 114

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The validity of a rule may be tested by its violation and public justification for such violation. This is the only way in which an appeal for public judgment may be asked. So long as the rule works smoothly, the public is not interested. If, however, a man violates the rule, or claims to have acted under a new rule which is better than the old one, there must be a decision between the two rules. The test applied in a case of this sort is the test of assent. The public, working through an individual, will first ask the aggressor why he did not seek the consent of those concerned before he violated the rule. If he acted in a crisis, the public is satisfied, for the old rule has not been abandoned, nor proven defective in ordinary circumstances. If, however, it is shown that the violator did have time to seek assent, that he made a choice between the old rule and a new one and deliberately chose the new one because he thought it was better, the public must intervene to establish the validity of the new rule or to reinstate the old. When assent is lacking, there is either open protest or a lack

of conformity to the new rule. A new rule, which is workable, and which has assent, will not provoke protest or general disobedience.

The public does not intervene unless there is wholesale disobedience, or unless large numbers are involved. But where there are large numbers involved, where the protest is made on behalf of large numbers, the public must act. The first fact that the public must establish is the authenticity of the protest. A decision must be made as to whether or not the spokesman is authorized. One way of ascertaining the authorization is, of course, through election. The test of assent by large bodies of men is simply that their authorized spokesmen must have agreed.

The test of conformity is closely related to the test of assent. If the members of the public evade the rule, it is evidence of criticism, or evidence that criticism will soon follow. Perhaps this should be stated in another way. If there is open criticism of a rule, a custom, a law, an institution, there will be evasion of that rule. Criticism is always an indication that the law is defective. While the public cannot determine the exact defect in the rule, it can, by the tests of conformity and assent, determine that there is a defect. The next step is to seek out the agencies most capable and likely to remedy the defect.

In discussing the next test, that of inquiry, Lippmann

divides the mass into the Ins and the Outs. The random collection of bystanders, says Lippmann, cannot interfere in all the problems of the day. There is a sort of professional public, the Ins, made up of more or less eminent persons. If settlements are made more or less continually, the Ins have the confidence of the public and the outsiders are arrayed behind the dominant leaders. If, however, the interested parties cannot agree, and a split occurs among the insiders, the public will support the dissenters, the Outs. The difference between the Ins and the Outs may be more or less significant--the Ins may tend toward collectivism, the Outs toward individualism; the Ins may have favored certain agricultural interests, the Outs, certain industrial interests. The Ins, after a term of power become so committed to certain policies and so entangled with interests connected with these policies that they are powerless to check the movement of the interest with which they are aligned. It is time, then, for the dissenters, the Outs, to intervene. The test of whether the Ins are handling affairs effectively is the presence or absence of disturbance.

The tests of assent and of conformity will determine when there is a need for reform. The only way the public can choose between the Ins and the Outs is to depend upon cumulative judgment as to whether problems are being solved or aggravated. However, wholesale judgments are not to be depended upon for final action. They must be broken up into more "retail" judgments. The people must locate by clear and objective tests the

actor in a controversy who should be given support.

The only test applicable in so locating this deserving actor, is the test of inquiry. The party who is willing to submit his claim to inquiry is generally adjudged to be the most sincere, most confident in his stand, most willing to risk his platform for the good of the people. If the parties to a dispute are willing to submit to an inquiry, there is some prospect of a settlement. Failing settlement, there is a chance for clarification of the point at issue, and failing clarification, there is the possibility that the most arbitrary of the disputants will be identified.

But, if all the parties submit to inquiry, the test of inquiry is valueless. The only thing which is accomplished is that the disputants may be identified. Other tests must be applied to ascertain whether the new rule is workable. These tests must ascertain whether the rule provides for its own clarification, whether or not it provides for amendment by consent, and whether or not it provides that due notice shall be given before amendment is made.<sup>47</sup>

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47. Ibid., pp. 114-140

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Summing up, Lippmann says: "The real value of debate is to make identification of the partisans possible. A problem exists where a rule of action is defective, and its defectiveness can best be judged by the public through the test of assent and the test of conformity. For remedies, normally, I have assumed that the public must turn to the Outs as against the Ins,

although these wholesale judgments may be refined by more analytical tests for specific issues. As samples for these more analytical tests I have suggested the test of inquiry for confused controversies, and for reforms, the test of interpretation, of amendment, of due notice."<sup>48</sup>

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48. Ibid., p. 140

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Lippmann does not claim that these tests are infallible, nor that they may not be improved upon. He ~~does~~ suggest, however that where the members of a public cannot use tests of this sort to guide them, the wisest course for them is not to act. The existence of a usable test is itself the test of whether the public ought to intervene.

There are certain principles underlying the tests proposed by Lippmann. Briefly, these are:

1. Executive action is not for the public.
2. The intrinsic merits of the question are not for the public.
3. The anticipation, the analysis, and the solution of a question are not for the public.
4. The specific, technical, intimate criteria required in the handling of a question are not for the public.
5. What is left for the public is a judgment as to whether the actors in the controversy are following a settled rule of behavior or their own arbitrary desires.
6. This judgment is dependent upon the discovery of

criteria by which reasonable behavior, conduct which follows a settled course, may be distinguished from arbitrary behavior.<sup>49</sup>

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49. Ibid., pp. 144-145

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## Conclusion

It is difficult to find outstanding contributions of any one writer in a subject on which so many authorities write and which is conceded to be one of the most important subjects of the day. So far as I have been able to ascertain, Lippmann is the first writer to make use of the concept of stereotypes in his definition of public opinion. The triangular relationship which he finds exists between the scene of action, the human picture of the scene, and the response to the picture working itself out upon the scene of action is clearly a Lippmann concept. Others concede the value of the concept and make use of it, but it is to Walter Lippmann that all writers give credit.

Lippmann is convinced that there is not one public, but many publics, each interested in its own problems, and while the members of the different publics may be the same individuals, each public seems to be concerned only with its problems. He builds up the personnel of his publics in rather a unique manner. To him anyone who is seeking to learn from the public, who proposes to the members plans to employ, in their most productive and harmonious form, the energies of man, is a member. The public is made up of those whose interest in any question leads them to align themselves on the side of any of the main actors. He does not concede the existence of a "collective mind." A public's will is made up of many wills, and when a public speaks, it speaks through some person. He conceives public opinion to

be, then, the voice of the interested spectators of action transmitted through some person.

He emphasizes the fact that public opinion is not spontaneously formed within the group, that it must be directed, educated, before it is capable of use. He sees, in the formation of opinion, the part played by the dual aspect of human nature. Interest is at the basis of opinion, and the self which is in the ascendancy when the question is being discussed is the self which is or is not influenced. The making of one general will out of a multitude of individual wills consists essentially in the use of symbols which assemble emotions after they have been detached from their ideals. The change is brought about by leaders who have access to the instruments of public opinion.

The function of public opinion is to intervene in a crisis. It is not a directing force, nor is it a creating force. It simply offers a solution in a conflict by aligning men in such a way as to back the leaders most capable of effecting a settlement of difficulties. Public opinion does not make the law. It approves or disapproves the advocates of the law and so affirms or denies its worth. The public is not a dispenser of law and morals. It is a reserve force that may be called into play during the poor functioning of existing laws or morals. In order that public opinion may function properly, it must be given to the instruments through which it works in

an organized form, not left to be organized by such instruments. It must, in other words, be organized for the press instead of by the press.

There should be an independent, expert organization which is capable of making unseen facts known to those who must decide the issue. Besides the experts to organize public opinion, Lippmann suggests that there should also be experts to direct the force which public opinion wields. The business of the public, then, is to decide whether the actors are following certain established rules, whether an existing rule of action is defective, and if so, who is best suited to remedy the defect.

The public must have certain objective tests to guide it in making decisions. The tests of assent, conformity, and inquiry may be applied. A rule is considered defective when the majority of the people no longer assent or conform to it. Persons best suited to remedy a defective rule are those who are willing to submit to an impartial inquiry into the facts and who will abide by the results of an inquiry which provides for self-clarification, amendment, and due notice of change. In most cases the Outs are supported against the Ins.

It is possible, indeed highly probable, that another student, or other students, will find additional contributions made by Walter Lippmann, or they may not agree that the phases which have been discussed are the phases of most value to an understanding of the subject of public opinion. It has been

my purpose to isolate, so far as isolation is possible, those ideas which seem to be peculiarly Lippmann's, those ideas which are most frequently quoted by other writers in the field. Certainly, to me, the outstanding contributions of Walter Lippmann to an understanding of the subject of public opinion are:

(1) Stereotypes, the pictures in our heads, form the basis for the formation of opinions. (2) Opinions should be organized for the press by experts and the weight, or force, which opinions are to exert should be controlled by experts. (3) It is the function of public opinion to operate only in a crisis and to operate by aligning the public on the particular question, behind the actors. (4) Objective tests, to ascertain whether or not the situation justifies public intervention, should be applied.

If we, as students, might incorporate these ideas into our concept of public opinion, it seems to me that we should have something on which to build, some point of departure, and that we might better understand the working of public opinion and the force which it has, or which it may have, in public affairs.

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