Editorial

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Free Speech after a Free Press

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The question of whether a population is a mob or a public is something scholars and politicians have debated for as long as there has been the concept of public opinion. And the power and possible abuse of language to move the public or manipulate the mob has been a focus of concern for almost as long. Now, we find ourselves in an age in which language includes images and sounds, truth is relative to one’s ideologies and aims, and communication has become a blood sport. The machinery of mass communication is crumbling but new devices of persuasion are becoming more powerful by targeting individuals, who can be studied and profiled through information mined from social media and then addressed with tailored information delivered to them via the same social media. The political discourse no longer reaches out to publics; it creates them. Strategic communication targets individuals with the intention of bringing together mini-masses of the offended, the aggrieved and the vengeful. The conversation of the culture has broken into diffuse and discordant appeals to special interests engaged in conversations designed to reassure the faithful and shame the doubter. And those conversations seem to increasingly consist of the persuasive monologic discourse that Jürgen Habermas equated with violence.

As Reporters Without Borders write in its 2017 Press Freedom Index report: “We have reached the age of post-truth, propaganda and suppression of freedoms—especially in democracies” (Perkel 2017). This age of post-truth is defined by a social media-delivered discourse dominated by slant, spin, lies, distortions and derision.

(i) Russian hackers are accused of tinkering with elections in the United States and France.
(ii) A campaign of misinformation aimed at Central and Eastern Europe is designed to promote Kremlin interests and undermine the E.U.
(iii) Massive use of social media in the Philippines spreads misinformation that destroys the reputations of opponents of thug-president Rodrigo Duterte.
(iv) A U.S. president denounces the free press as “among the most dishonest human beings on Earth.”
(v) Fake news stories plant ideas in the public consciousness that is so powerful that they defy debunking.
(vi) Campaigns of derision delegitimize scientific research and undermine the political establishment in the minds of the public.

All of this presents us with a new variation of the old question: With social media, have we freed the conversation of the culture from the gatekeepers of mediated communication, or are we dismantling institutions necessary to ensure the reliability, trustworthiness and impartiality of the information we need to govern ourselves? This is not to say mainstream media and politicians have not done much to delegitimize themselves,
with their deference to power and reflexive defence of the status quo. The crisis in the news business has often been presented as the challenge of preserving the old corporate, factory news media—a self-immolating plea to that segment of the population that perceives that system as aligned with, and dedicated to preserving, the business and political elites.

This has created a clouded public discourse ripe for the creation of what Marxists used to call false consciousness. And it conjures up the echoes of the so-called Lippmann-Dewey debate over whether reason and truth can grow out of unfettered and inclusive discussion, or whether the “trampling and the roar of a bewildered herd” (Lippmann, 1993: 145) will drown out the voices of reason and deliver the public into the hands of demagogues.

Michael Schudson (2008) has argued that focusing the debate over public opinion on Lippmann and Dewey centres the discussion on what is little more than a squabble over the difference between representational and direct democracy. The Lippmann-Dewey discourse is something that has been treated as having its origins in the 1920s—when journalist and political theorist Walter Lippmann and philosopher-psychologist-educator John Dewey were writing the works around which the “debate” is constructed. However, it really sprang up over the past quarter-century, as a construct by liberal theorists arguing over the role of media in society. “What turned the Lippmann-Dewey discourse into a ‘debate’ were liberal intellectuals in the 1980s and 1990s writing at another moment of democratic disillusion as they sought to take stock and seek hope” (1032). At this moment of democratic disillusion, it may be useful to revisit the “debate” and its points of contention.

Dewey and his colleagues at the University of Chicago—George Herbert Mead, Robert Park and Charles Cooley—were fixed on the idea of communication as existence, as a way of being that forges mobs into publics (Park, 1975) and transforms society into a community (Dewey 1954). Dewey’s focus was the search for the Great Community, which had to be forged from the cold machinery of the Great Society. This is an approach that resonates in Habermas’s Public Sphere, Raymond Williams’s common culture, and in James Carey’s belief in the “conversational public,” which he described as “a society of argument, disputation, or debate” (1997, 217-218). It also, however, puts immense trust in the capacity of the public for political thought and engagement, and neglects to address the possibility that even the smartest citizen can be taken in by a determined con man. Every Deweyan concept should be prefaced with the phrase, “In a perfect world.”

Lippmann, on the other hand, was something of a thwarted idealist, forever looking for the solution to a problem that is probably unsolvable: how to protect democracy from the tyranny of the majority, the manipulation of special interests and the disinterest of the public. In short, having witnessed democracy commit suicide by ballot in Italy and Germany, his chief worry was that people might be naturally inclined to vote away the rights of their children (1963, 216). As for the news media, as far back as the early 1920s, Lippmann had come to the conclusion that the press was dominated by people whose interests were so closely aligned with the rich and powerful that it could not be trusted to provide a coherent world view. The best that could be expected was that the press play watchdog for the public good, and provide enough policy information for voters to make semi-informed choices every four years (1997). The news media Lippmann writes are “like the beam of a searchlight that moves restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another out of darkness and into vision. Men cannot do the work of the world by this light alone. They cannot govern society by episodes, incidents and eruptions” (1993, 229). One can only imagine what he would have made of the thinly disguised ideology and opinion that regularly erupt on social media today.
The way Lippmann’s biographer, Ronald Steel, described the Lippmann-Dewey discourse is that the former saw the public as “a Great Beast to be tamed,” and the latter a “force that could be educated” (1980, 218). However, there is a third interpretation: that the public is a great beast ruled by its emotions, and can be manipulated by any force smart enough, ruthless enough and devious enough to find ways to influence those emotions. Lippmann’s concern was that “the problems that vex democracy seem to be unmanageable by democratic methods” (1997, 179-180), and that pandering to the public opinion poses a threat to democracy while pretending to uphold it. “[L]eaders often pretend they have merely uncovered a program that existed in the minds of their public,” he writes. This is a lie, because ideas don’t emerge from the mass, because “thought is the function of an organism, and a mass is not an organism.” The mass is “constantly exposed to suggestion” from special interests, who are out to move public opinion in the direction they wish it to go (155).

Though he never mentioned Lippmann and Dewey by name, Raymond Williams argued that dark cynicism and blind optimismleave a vacuum for special interests to fill(Peters, 2003), and that the discourse is not one about a distant mass of “little people.” It is about all of us, and that the best and brightest are as vulnerable as the so-called massesto messages constructed to appeal to them. We are all susceptible, Williams argues, to people skilled in fashioning the message to suit their purposes. To believe otherwise blinds us to the possibility that we are being manipulated and makes us even more open to manipulation. In fact, if one were to take anecdotal evidence from the jargon-laden faddishness of much of the current discussion surrounding the digital world, one might be inclined to think that the vanity of the best and brightest makes them more susceptible to manipulation.

As for the uninvolved masses, Williams argues that detachment is what you get when a sullen public is confronted with persuasive monologic discourse designed to make the receiver believe that the sender’s purpose is his, too. Political indifference is a hostile and quite reasonable response to an agenda-laden message devised by the sender and forced upon the receiver. “What I have called this sulleness ... is now a very prevalent reaction to the dominative kinds of mass-communication. ... Inertia and apathy have always been employed by the governed as a comparatively safe weapon against their governors” (1983, 316). Unfortunately, this very sullenness has contributed to making us, as a public, ripe for exploitation. “We are all malleable,” Williams warns, and the most powerful tool for moulding us is the media, which is yoked to a philosophy of communication that involves control and profit. When “we reject this kind of exploitation, we shall reject its ideology, and seek a new definition of communication” (312).

With his Ideal Speech Situation, Habermas delivered that new definition of communication: an open exchange of ideas by people unafraid of persecution, reprisal or censorship and unfettered by bias or preconception, and in which statements are intelligible, verifiable and truthful, and everyone has an equal chance to speak. However, this can serve as both a blueprint for democratic discourse and as an operating manual for propaganda. Follow it, and the discourse takes you wherever the truth may lead; understand it only to subvert it, and you can run the world.

Orwell foretold of a world in which people were bludgeoned into doing what was desired of them; Huxley saw a world in which what was desired would be made pleasurable, and people would be narcotized into a euphoric submission. Orwell wrote the better book; Huxley had the more prescient vision. He saw that one need not engineer a program of suppression and censorship, when it’s so much easier to create noise and fury, and glittering
distractions. And, if people are inclined to become activists, they can be placated with a steam of online petitions and ice-bucket challenges that deliver the illusion of activism without risk or commitment. As in Huxley’s *Brave New World*, the enabling elements is technology and the blind solutionism, as Morozov (2013) defined it, that comes with it. As Habermas writes, our depolitization has been made palatable by “having technology and science also take on the role of ideology” (Habermas1989, 253).

References


Orig. 1937.


Orig. 1922.


