

The Solution to the Dewey/Lippmann Debate

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In the early twentieth century, John Dewey and Walter Lippmann engaged in a social and philosophical debate concerning the role of media in a democracy. In the Age of Information, the importance of the Dewey/Lippmann debate could not be more apparent. While knowledge is power, information can be used to control the masses or empower them. Utilizing a Deweyan approach, I attempt to synthesize Lippmann's intellectual elites and Dewey's artistic concept in order to propose a possible solution to the nearly century long feud.

Key Terms: democracy; public; democratic elitism; news media

In 2004, in the midst of the presidential debate, Jon Stewart, the host of Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*, went on the CNN political debate-type show *Crossfire*. Instead of making fun of then president George W. Bush which was most likely expected of him, he attacked the two hosts of the CNN program for being irresponsible "partisan hacks" (youtube.com 2012). He criticized them for being a part of the corporate-run media that is "hurting America". *Crossfire* was cancelled shortly thereafter and *The Daily Show* continues to thrive today. *Crossfire* was not the only program Stewart has criticized/confronted. He regularly criticizes Fox News, CNN, CNBC, and most major news networks and has confronted other news-like show hosts such as Bill O'Reilly and Jim Cramer of *The O'Reilly Factor* and *Mad Money* respectively. Jon Stewart is a comedian and he does not hide it nor does he pretend to be anything other than that. This however does not change the fact that his program "'is clearly impacting American dialogue' and 'getting people to think critically about the public square'" (Kakutani 2008, August 15).

Much to the chagrin of the corporate media conglomerates, Jon Stewart and his program has a following and respect that most contemporary journalists could not dream of achieving. How did this happen? How did a comedy program become one of the leading

sources of news for the younger generation? The answer is necessity. Since the Dewey/Lippmann debate of the twentieth century, which was primarily concerned with how information should be provided to the public in a way that benefits the democratic society, journalism has been on a one-way track of creating and perpetuating a largely uninformed and irrational public. It is no surprise to those involved in or knowledgeable of the scholarly debate regarding the ideas of John Dewey and Walter Lippmann that the mainstream journalism industry has failed in epic proportions. The search for an answer has been both rigorous and frustrating and whether he intended to or not, Jon Stewart has finally provided the academic community with a valuable clue for how to fix such a disastrous problem.

In order to effectively approach and define the problem, it is necessary to first define the ideal democracy and its public and what role journalism plays within that democracy. Next, I will look at the differences between John Dewey and Walter Lippmann concerning the same ideas to see whose approach is most appropriate given their individual ideologies and examine the journalism problem in light of the Dewey/Lippmann debate as discussed in the writings of Nathan Crick and Mark Whipple. Finally, by reconciling Dewey

and Lippmann utilizing a Deweyan approach to democracy and the public and integrating the concepts of intellectual elites and art, I will formulate a proposal based around the example of *The Daily Show* that promotes an imaginative approach to journalism.

Democracy

In my mind, a democratic society is built upon the premise that the collective citizenry of a particular state is able to come together as an informed community to make decisions that will benefit not only the state as a whole, but in turn, every individual within that state. This concept of government is reliant on the presupposition that the sharing of information and ideas among a society will inevitably lead the majority of its members to make logical and considerate decisions that allow the state to advance and prosper as peacefully as possible. If this were not assumed to be true, then democracy as a means for governing a state would be a useless ideal, and any variation from that truth would no longer be true democracy, as in the case of Lippmann's democratic elitism which will be discussed later.

In order for a democracy to be positively effective in its truest and most free form, one in which every citizen actually does have an equal role in determining the course of the state, then it is necessary for the public within that society to be fully and equally informed. It thus follows that the institutions and mechanisms for educating and providing knowledge and information to the constituents of that state are of the utmost importance and that any failure within those systems predicates an ultimate failure of that democracy. The concept of democracy in the United States is currently suffering that very problem.

Though the United States is not truly a democracy nor was ever necessarily intended to be one, democratic ideals are at the heart of the American public. The Constitution set up a republican form of government out of the necessity to protect liberty. Democracy is often synonymous with liberty. In essence, the federal government was created to protect and foster the democracy of the states and the liberty of citizens within those states. When we engage in conflicts abroad in the name of democracy, we must engage in conversations at home about what exactly that means. When so many fine young men and women have died and are willing to die for those democratic ideals, then it is our duty as citizens to work towards the realization of those ideals. Being properly informed is the first step. The two main entities entrusted with informing the public are the education system and the mass media. Focusing on the latter, its chief and most highly regarded instrument is the news media industry. It is for this reason that John Dewey and Walter Lippmann found the news media so crucial to discuss. Without a properly informed public, a democracy cannot thrive and may cease to exist even in principle.

Dewey/Lippmann

The Dewey/Lippmann debate of the twentieth century is the foundation upon which almost all discourse concerning this issue is built upon. Though this debate has had a resurgence of discussion within the academic community in the past 20 years, it has remained largely ignored and underappreciated given its ultimate implications. Dewey and Lippmann have two different concepts of the public and how to inform them which stem from their differing opinions on an effective democracy.

Walter Lippmann

Mark Whipple sums up Lippmann's concept of democracy:

Lippmann contended that the masses were naturally and structurally unable to form intelligent, democratic publics. Lippmann thus advocated for the masses a basically passive role in the democratic process as spectators rather than participants, whose sole responsibility is to choose between one of two parties with few general differences. Thus, the crisis of democracy results, Lippmann argued, not from too little, but too much democracy. The solution for this crisis, he argued, was to redistribute intelligence and the critical agency of political decisionmaking [sic] away from the masses and toward a centralized body of intelligent elites. Lippmann was a forceful and important forerunner of democratic elitism. (2005:160)

In Whipple's analysis of Lippmann's *Public Opinion*, there are two main reasons for "the disconnect between truth and the fictions we develop to represent this truth" (2005:159).

First, structural barriers—particularly the news media—prevent citizens from gaining access to the truth. Among these structural barriers, Lippmann cites "artificial censorships, the limitations of social contact, the comparatively meager time available in each day for paying attention to public affairs, the distortion arising because events have to be compressed into very short messages, [and] the difficulty of making a small vocabulary express a complicated world"...

Second, even if these structural difficulties ceased to exist, the simple and limiting nature of the human mind would prevent a realistic representation of the truth. He writes: "[humans] are not equipped to deal with so much subtlety, so much variety, so many permutations and combinations. And although we have to act in that environment, we have to reconstruct it on a simpler model before we can manage with it." (2005:159)

Although Lippmann recognizes the fundamental problem with the news media industry in that it serves to prevent the public from being fully and properly

informed, he asserts his disbelief that it is even possible for there to be an informed public. And so he resolves to treat the public as passive rather than active democratic participants, largely unintelligent enough to understand critical issues and to be talked at rather than involved in political discourse. His solution is then based on that presumption; "the creation of a centralized body of experts to act as society's intelligence" (Whipple 2005:160). (This in a way is what the news media has taken upon itself to be, though not Lippmann's intention for they are in no way the experts he had in mind.) His solution is too similar to an oligarchy to give it credence in a democracy. In general, the concept of democratic elitism seems contradictory to the precepts of a democracy. But if his theory and solution are built upon the assumption that an informed public is not realistic, then it is necessary to at least remove the "structural barriers" in order to test that assumption. If an informed public is possible and eventually realized, any elitist assertion becomes irrelevant.

John Dewey

In *The Public and its Problems*, John Dewey asserts that an informed public is possible and necessary for the development and progression of a truly democratic state. To Dewey, an informed public is the end goal of that state as well, and the only way to achieve that is through a truly participatory democracy. He saw democracy not only as a form of government, but as a means for perpetuating knowledge. Dewey (1927:158) thought of "knowledge [as] a function of association and communication; it depends upon tradition, upon tools and methods socially transmitted, developed and sanctioned." Though he viewed democracy as the best form of government to promote free and open communication, he also

realized the many problems of our current form of government in how it maintains an uninformed public. Seemingly overlooked by much of the current discourse on the Dewey/Lippmann debate is Dewey's conclusion that governmental and corporate powers desire an ignorant public.

The smoothest road to control political conduct is by control of opinion. As long as interests of pecuniary profit are powerful, and a public has not located and identified itself, those who have this interest will have an unresisted [*sic*] motive for tampering with the springs of political action in all that affects them. (Dewey 1927:182)

On those wishing to control public opinion, he asserts, "this does not mean that some mysterious collective agency is making decisions, but that some few persons who know what they are about are taking advantage of mass force to conduct the mob their way" (1927:18). "What is applied and employed as the alternative to knowledge in regulations of society is ignorance, prejudice, class-interest and accident" (1927:174). These few persons who could easily and clearly be identified as those in power of the few corporate media conglomerates prefer their public to be motivated by habit and fear of change rather than by knowledge.

Habits bind us to orderly and established ways of action because they generate ease, skill and interest in things to which we have grown used and because they instigate fear to walk in different ways, and because they leave us incapacitated for the trial of them. Habit does not preclude the use of thought, but it determines the channels within which it operates. Thinking is secreted in the interstices of habits. (Dewey 1927:160)

It is much easier to market to people's habits because they are predictable. What is the public's participation in the news of today if nothing more than merely a habit? Get up and read the paper, watch the news before bed, and never critically analyze any of the information. And what does this news of

habit consist of; individual and isolated events chosen for unknown reasons over others presented in short segments to an unsuspecting audience.

"News" signifies something which has just happened, and which is new just because it deviates from the old and regular. But its *meaning* depends upon relation to what it imports, to what its social consequences are. This import cannot be determined unless the new is placed in relation to the old, to what has happened and been integrated into the course of events. Without coordination and consecutiveness, events are not events, but mere occurrences, intrusions; an event implies that out of which a happening proceeds. Hence even if we discount the influence of private interests in procuring suppression, secrecy and misrepresentation, we have here an explanation of the triviality and "sensational" quality of so much of what passes as news. The catastrophic, namely, crime, accident, family rows, personal clashes and conflicts, are the most obvious forms of breaches of continuity; they supply the element of shock which is the strictest meaning of sensation; they are the *new* par excellence, even though only the date of the newspaper could inform us whether they happened last year or this, so completely are they isolated from their connections. (Dewey 1927:180)

Dewey never claimed that it was possible for the public to possess all the knowledge available. What he promoted instead was a critical and reflective thought process. Nathan Crick (2009) points out that "for Dewey, what matters is not that citizens can know, cognitively, all the facts of the world. What he desired was the fostering of attitudes and habits toward events, people, and objects that were more sympathetic, flexible, and intelligently creative" (494). An informed public would consist not of know-it-alls, but of people who could utilize associations to assist "in perceiving the relationships between themselves and the contemporary fragmented social environment and encourage them to creatively use this information to inform

their political action and political selves” (Kosnoski 2005:194).

What Dewey and Lippmann agree on is that contemporary society is too fragmented for the public to fully comprehend. But while Lippmann suggests an elite group of intelligent individuals to solve that problem, Dewey believes that it is possible to empower the public with tools that will allow them to critically think about the problems confronting them. Open communication and associations amongst the public will contribute to the expansion of knowledge. Dewey’s “cure for the ailments of democracy is more democracy” (1927:146). Freedom is the guiding force of Dewey’s solution, namely “freedom of social inquiry and...freedom of expression” (1927:166-167).

Most overlooked in the Dewey/Lippmann debate are Dewey’s theoretical implications. The fact that he is writing about the problems of the public is the most obvious clue that Dewey understands there is a social problem that would prevent the public from effectively running a true democracy. “The prime condition of a democratically organized public is a kind of knowledge and insight which does not yet exist. In its absence, it would be the height of absurdity to try to tell what it would be like if it existed” (1927:166). Democracy, like liberty, has its disadvantages. If we are too weak as a society to handle either then we need to make ourselves stronger.

A fear of mob mentality might dissuade people against Dewey’s argument. A mob mentality occurs when people lose their sense of self and just go with the crowd, from making trendy purchase decisions to killing innocent people. But his goal is to create and propagate a public in which a negative mob mentality is much less likely to develop due to the critical thinking skills

and knowledge an informed public would possess. Each person’s conscience would be their own. In this society, it seems more than likely Lippmann would have no need for his centralization of intellectual elites if the public possessed the tools that allowed them to make informed and rational decisions. And just because that is not the truth now and we may seem so far off from that reality, by no means should it follow that we abandon that goal and settle for a largely ignorant and fragmented society. The only motivations against working towards an equally informed society would be a desire for power and/or elitism. Besides those selfish deterrents, it is clear that we must properly inform and educate our public in order to achieve a more democratic nation or at least a society that would be capable of becoming one. The question is how?

The Solution

According to Nathan Crick (2009), “the lesson often taken away from [the Dewey/Lippmann debate] is that Lippmann’s approach is ethically suspect but economically viable while Dewey’s approach is ethically superior but hopelessly naïve” (485). So, the obvious solution is one that is both economically viable and ethically superior, an approach that both Dewey and Lippmann could support. Crick (2009) views it as a “cooperation between experts and citizens in the determination of problems and the experimentation with solutions” (493). He discusses that though the internet is a valuable and extremely democratic form of communication, there is too much clutter to look solely to the internet for the answer. Its freedom and openness should never be underestimated as to their value for democracy, but with an already disenfranchised public, a solution that relies solely on those concepts runs the risk of further fragmenting the public.

Rightfully, Crick (2009) calls for a “supplement [of] the current communication practices of corporate liberalism with noncommercial agencies of cooperative social inquiry and artistic news production” (480). Unfortunately he leaves us with not much more than that though he was very close to a practical solution.

As I do, Crick successfully points to Dewey’s (1927) solution in *The Public and its Problems*; “Artists have always been the real purveyors of news, for it is not the outward happening itself which is new, but the kindling of it by emotion, perception and appreciation” (184). Crick (2009) expands on Dewey’s (1927) concept of “freeing the artist in literary presentation” (183); “this ‘freeing’ cannot simply be a negative freedom but a positive one. To free the artist is not just to release constraints, but to provide the factual and material resources to construct a message with scope, simplicity, flexibility, and power” (494). While discussing Lippmann’s desire for the “creation of a ‘central international news-agency’ (much like the modern BBC in Britain or NPR/PBS in the United States) whose independence was protected by a permanent endowment untouchable by partisan interests” (2009:489), Crick fails to realize the concrete solution he is looking for is simply a synthesis of Dewey’s artistic concept and Lippmann’s intellectual elite. This is the fire for which Jon Stewart’s *The Daily Show* is the spark.

The Daily Show is a perfect example of integrating art with news. Comedy is an art form and the writers work tirelessly to entertain as well as inform. It is this entertaining aspect that pulls in the viewers. In modern society, people have many things to distract them and far less free time (whether because of too much work or too much play). What they do with their free

time is a choice. Some people watch the news out of habit and some watch it thinking it is still valuable or just want to be kept up to date. With the internet, news programs face irrelevance if people can just look up what is going on in the world on their computers or smart phones. The news industry of tomorrow is one that entertains as well as informs. *The Daily Show* does this. What it lacks, for now, is authority.

My solution calls for the creation of an independent news program that brings together Lippmann’s intellectual elites and Dewey’s artistic creativity. It would be a station much like PBS/NPR with an endowment that would prevent the pitfalls of corporate liberalism. The station would integrate academic intellectuals and artists alike. The main artists I envision would be predominantly writers, comedians, and actors, though one could easily see how musicians and physical artists and artists of all kinds could find a place here. These artists would each have programs on the station dedicated to news with their own specified twist. The relaying of the news would be entertaining and unique and the stories would be provided by freelance journalists who are encouraged to be biased and not hide their bias and utilize a narrative style. All stories will be supplemented by contextualization of at least some sort provided by academic scholars who work for the show from all different fields, especially science (in honor of Lippmann). The program can even have a blog and website that allows the public to participate/contribute in some form or another. Imagine *The Daily Show* meets *This American Life* with blogospheres that incorporate the academic community and the average person (much like a *Wikipedia*). Expanding upon that idea, the possibilities would be endless and the results would be a public choosing to be entertained and

informed. It is a place where imagination and knowledge become one.

In his book, *The Educated Imagination*, Northrop Frye (1964) gives a little more insight on the value of such a solution:

So, you may ask, what is the use of studying the world of imagination where anything is possible and anything can be assumed, where there are no rights or wrongs and all arguments are equally good? One of the most obvious uses, I think, is its encouragement of tolerance. In the imagination our own beliefs are also only possibilities, but we can also see the possibilities in the beliefs of others. Bigots and fanatics seldom have any use for the arts, because they're so preoccupied with their beliefs and actions that they can't see them as also possibilities. It's possible to go to the other extreme... But such people are much less common than bigots, and in our world much less dangerous. (77-78)

I have imagined a news media system that contributes to an informed public capable of effectively participating in a true democracy that John Dewey and Walter Lippmann tried to dream up for almost a century. In the very least, this type of news station would serve to keep the rest of the news media conglomerates in check, much like comedians such as Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, Bill Maher, and John Oliver attempt to do now. The best possible result would be a station that serves as the paragon for the news industry (and other news media would have no choice but to either drastically change or cease to exist) and creates an informed public that paves the way for the potential of a true and free democracy. It may be naïve to strive for ideals, but it seems ignorant or just lazy to strive for anything less.

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