

Power Over the Masses: A Critique on Lippmann's *Public Opinion*

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While reading Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion* of 1922, I wasn't too convinced by the claims that were made, but I connected with a passage that I believe to be more significant than the others for several reasons. The passage reads, "Those features of the world outside which have to do with the behavior of other human beings, in so far as that behavior crosses ours, is dependent upon us, or is interesting to us, we call roughly public affairs. The pictures inside the heads of these human beings, the pictures of themselves, of other, of their needs, purposes, and relationship, are their public opinions. Those pictures which are acted upon by groups of people, or by individuals in the name of groups, are Public Opinion with capital letters." (18) This particular quote from the discourse, speaks to the idea that the images that human beings create inside their heads, often mislead themselves or others, in their dealings with the outside world. There are three reasons for this: (1) limited access to the facts, (2) manipulation of facts by stereotypes, and (3) identification of stereotypes with individual interests. (18) This concept is in part catered to the fact that it takes a while to change one's perception when one has acquired knowledge early on in life.

My research of this concept led me to a Debra L. Merskin book titled, *Media, Minorities and Meaning: A Critical Introduction*. She begins the book with a Linda Hogan quote that, I believe parallels the themes we discuss in class. The quote states, "What are stories if not the container of culture, the body, and its inner world? Myth encompasses many elements; the human and divine, the history of a people, their thought, their way of being, and the terrain in which they live" (Merskin). This book examines "historical and cultural narratives underlying mass media and advertising sustained stereotypes and/or mis-representations of women, people of color, and other minorities. Merskin believes that once we as a society, can understand the

psychological reasons why people categorize each other, it will be easier to understand and interpret the problematic media representations and improve them.

In a chapter titled “The World Outside versus the Pictures in Our Heads”, she uses the Lippmann passage I chose, to provide insight on six factors that limit people’s access to facts: artificial censorships, limitations of social contact, limited time, distortions, limited vocabulary, and fear (Merskin 6). Each factor has been, in some way, discussed during class. Lippman unpacks the same concepts in a different way. Furthermore, Merskin references Lippman again when she further explains “artificial censorship” as a selective presentation of facts, both verbal and visual. “Limitations of social contact” elaborates on the idea that people within social groups surround themselves with like-minded individuals. This highlights the many times we’ve discussed the echo chambers that we create for ourselves to reinforce and validate the beliefs and values that we confirm through the media. The next factor is described as “limited time available” which involves the thought that humans are always in a hurry, so they make excuses to explore the opportunity to contemplate or even consider the assumptions and presumptions of those who are different from themselves. The fifth factor, “distortions”, are what I believe to be the most talked about factor of the 21st century. It’s the simple concept that the majority of what we know about the outside world, is represented by the media through words and images, resulting in distortion. Distortion can be a product of gatekeepers (editors/producers) or other factors involved in the storytelling process, but regardless of how it’s happening, the agenda-setting function of the media plays a major role in propaganda. The fifth factor, “limited vocabulary” highlights the use of word choice when the media is describing the news. A word that’s not offensive to one person, may be offensive to another. She uses the terms “immigrant”,

“terrorist” and “freedom” as examples to further emphasize how each word has a different meaning depending on one’s beliefs, experiences and values. All six of these factors play powerful roles in the information system we live in, but I believe it’s our duty to decipher the extent to which we allow the media to dictate our beliefs.

As I continued to ponder Lippman’s ideologies, the more I saw his philosophy being applicable to the environment in which I live in. I recently rewatched one of my favorite Disney animated films, *The Incredibles 2*, and found myself applying this Lippman passage to the plot of the movie. (If you haven’t already seen the movie, you should!) The woman who is the main villain in the movie is disguised as the “screen-slaver”. She uses technology to create goggles that she puts on innocent people, and television screens to hypnotize people as a means to convey her personal agenda, which in this case, is illegalizing superheroes. The whole movie is based on how superheroes (the minority), who live a life of being ostracized by society (the majority), fight for their right to be heard and recognized for the struggles they face to fight crime and injustice. This plot is quite similar to the ways in which minority communities have fought for their natural born rights as citizens in a country that once treated them as objects. I critiqued this matter even further when I realized the fact that the ways in which the media presented the superheroes negated and degraded the fact that they too were human beings. The media depicted them as criminals for destroying buildings, but omitted the fact that they saved lives too. This animated movie explores the concept of civilians counting on superheroes but also on the media, and when the media (screen-slaver) didn’t seek the public’s best interest, but instead framed the superheroes, I realized that mass media plays the same game in the real world. All in all, when people put their trust into the media, they then create a space for the media to control their

attitudes, values and beliefs, which not only allows people to be easily swayed, it enables the system to take advantage of its power over the masses.

### Work Cited

Lippmann, Walter. *Public Opinion*. United Kingdom, Harcourt, Brace, 1922.

Merskin, Debra L. "Media, Minorities, and Meaning." *Google Books*, Google, 2011, 6.