LIPPMANN AND DEWEY IN THE 21ST CENTURY: REVIVING DEMOCRACY IN THE DIGITAL LANDSCAPE OF TODAY

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Contents

I. Introduction

In 1922 Walter Lippmann, a respected journalist and political commentator, published his most well-known book, *Public Opinion*. Finding himself disillusioned with the functioning of American democracy after his time as a political reporter and correspondent during World War One, Lippmann attempts in *Public Opinion* to both diagnose the problems within the American democratic system and provide a remedy for its dysfunction. Informed by numerous occurrences of purposeful manipulation of the public he witnessed as a journalist during wartime, Lippmann identifies the heart of the dysfunction within one of the founding tenets of traditional democratic theory: the notion of a well-informed citizenry, knowledgeable about their political circumstances and subsequently able to reflect their best interests through the democratic structure.

Lippmann first introduces and defends his claim that Public Opinion a is faulty, misled, and irrational force due to various epistemological influences skewing individuals' interpretations and assessments of their political reality.[1] Lippmann proceeds to critique traditional democratic theory for incorrectly assuming all citizens are able to access the information and analytic expertise necessary to have an informed opinion on all political affairs (Lippmann, 31). His final portion of the book, built upon his analysis of the failures of the public and the incorrect assumptions of democratic theory, lays out an argument for the implementation of 'organized intelligence' in the form of a government agency made up of experts responsible for collecting facts about the social and political environment, and relaying this knowledge to elected officials and policymakers (Lippmann, 31).

[1] Lippmann uses 'Public Opinion' to refer to the force of the opinion of the citizenry on a specific political matter established out of the aggregation of individual opinions.

The pragmatist philosopher John Dewey reviewed *Public Opinion* and Lippmann's later publication *The Phantom Public* in a column for "The New Republic". In these reviews Dewey largely praises Lippmann, even citing *Public Opinion* as "the most effective indictment of democracy as currently conceived ever penned" *(John Dewey: The Middle Works*, 337). Yet, Dewey raises initial concerns regarding Lippman's purported solution to the problem of the public. Dewey elaborates upon these concerns in his own 1927 book *The Public and its Problems*, engaging directly with Lippmann and ultimately defending the importance of the public in informing political decision-making.

These writings by Lippmann and Dewey have maintained scholarly relevance over the past century, coming to be referred to almost canonically as the 'Lippmann-Dewey Debate'. Partly a consequence of Lippmann's political project in *Public Opinion* and Dewey's famed response, Lippmann is often read as a technocrat born out of the Progressive Era with far too strong faith in the newly emerging social sciences. Yet, the mainstream interpretation of the 'Lippmann-Dewey Debate' as a discussion of technocracy versus democracy has recently been questioned.[2] Micheal Schudson in his 2008 essay argues that Lippmann's critique of democracy in *Public Opinion* has been repeatedly misinterpreted as in *fundamental opposition* to democracy when this was not his position nor the aim of his project.[3] If the Lippmann-Dewey Debate was not one of technocracy versus democracy, what was their disagreement truly over? Can clarifying these two thinkers' analyses of the problem of the public help us in navigating the trials of democracy today?

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[2] Both Micheal Schudson and Sue Curry Jansen identify the rise of this interpretation of Lippmann as beginning in the 1980s.

[3] Micheal Schduson is not the only thinker to make this claim, but the one I will be working with in this essay. Others, such as Sue Curry Jansen in 2009, have also drawn concerns with the way Lippmann began to be interpreted beginning in the 1980s.

In this paper, I aim to reintroduce the Dewey-Lippmann debate in both its true disagreement as well as relevance to the problems facing democracy, the public, and political communication in the present. I will ultimately argue that the true strengths of both thinkers are needed to fully address 'the problem of the public' as it exists today.

I will first outline what Lippmann identifies to be the problem of the public and his proposed solution within *Public Opinion*. My interpretation supports Schudson's claim that reading Lippmann's project as 'anti-democrat' is a misinterpretation of his task. After resolving common misinterpretations in Lippmann's work that have allowed the exchange between him and Dewey to be framed as technocracy versus democracy, I will discuss Dewey's *The Public and its Problems*, attempting to identify where the true areas of similarity and difference in Dewey and Lippmann's thoughts on the problem of the public lie.

While both share very similar concerns over the functioning of the public and aspirations for a more effective and responsive government, I argue that the true disagreement between these thinkers is their differing conceptions of social knowledge, both in how it is accessed and how it must be utilized within government. Although Dewey effectively defends the epistemic ability of the public to accumulate the knowledge necessary for a democracy, thereby rendering Lippmann's agency of experts unnecessary, I find his critique of Lippmann's solution to be much more effective than his own response to the problem. Calling for the revitalization of the public through the expansion of democratic values beginning with local communities, Dewey's proposal necessarily faces challenges in implementation when the actors needed are part of the ineffective and disorganized public itself.

From here I will consider the effectiveness of Lippmann and Dewey's thought in application to the problem of the public as it appears today. I will first evaluate the status of the American citizenry and its relationship to democracy in the present, seeking to determine

whether visible, democratic, Deweyan-aligned progress has been made toward a more effective public. Although the internet and its communication tools initially seem promising for addressing the epistemological barriers to an engaged democratic society, evidence suggests these technologies could be undermining democracy rather than supporting it. The disorganized and divided public appears to persist.

I conclude my paper by arguing that while the prominent notion of Lippmann and Dewey as in 'debate' has prevented the collaboration of their thought to the challenges of today, this does not have to be the case. Instead, Dewey's a) conception of democracy as a communicative and participatory practice, assisted by Lippmann's b) shrewd insight into the epistemic issues emerging from technological change can work in tandem to orient an approach to addressing the problems facing the public today. By taking practical steps toward mitigating the epistemic barriers still hindering citizens' political understanding, progress towards the revitalization of the public and Lippmann and Dewey's vision for a more effective democracy can begin.

II. Walter Lippmann's 'Public Opinion'

It is certainly easier to write off Lippmann as a technocrat with little faith in the average citizen than to confront the true weight of his project within *Public Opinion*. However, this overlooks the plethora of insight Lippmann can offer democracy and political communication today. While it is clear Dewey correctly grasped the true project behind Lippmann's work when engaging with it, others have not been so kind to Lippmann. Attempting to pinpoint where interpretations of Lippmann's work went astray, Schudson examines a series of influential scholars who interpreted *Public Opinion* primarily in the context of Dewey's responses to Lippmann. Presenting these thinkers as being in a 'debate' has distorted their discussion into one of technocracy versus democracy and elitist versus champion of the people. Yet, this understanding of their arguments does little justice to Lippmann's depth of thought and

legitimate concern for American democracy within his work. A faithful outline of Lippmann's task in *Public Opinion* is first necessary to understand the true nature of the disagreement between Lippmann and Dewey and to make visible the relevance of their debate today.

A. Democratic Theory's Original Sin

Tucked immediately behind the front cover of *Public Opinion*, a well-known excerpt from Plato's *Republic* introduces Lippmann's project: the allegory of the cave. "Behold! Human beings living in a sort of underground den, which has a mouth open towards the light," (Plato, 514). The excerpt continues, depicting the prisoners as bound to the cave and unable to access or see the world beyond its mouth. They are not only physically constrained but limited in thought, unable to consider anything beyond the inside of the cave. These prisoners are thus bound to a world of shadows, doomed to mere representations of things, of beings, of the truth. "This is a strange image [...] they are strange prisoners," Glaucon states concerning the cave. "Like ourselves" responds Socrates.

It is with this sobering picture of the capacities of human knowledge that Lippmann sets up his first chapter "The World Outside and the Pictures In Our Heads." For it is out of his concern with the discrepancy between reality and humans' perception of it that Lippmann's argument finds its initial claim: the public is unable to obtain the accurate political knowledge necessary for it to serve as the primary informant in democratic decision making. While this initial claim is easily read as elitist and dismissive of ordinary citizens' capacities, Lippmann's reasoning is more nuanced than this. He bases this claim upon 1) faulty premises within democratic theory and 2) the epistemological limitations of citizens within a complex society.

Lippmann argues that traditional democratic theory has "built [itself] on sand," constructing a political theory that incorrectly understands citizens as omnicompetent individuals or "people in their self-contained environment [with] all the facts before them" (Lippmann, 262,

275). Lippmann explains the difficulty the founders of democracy saw in a government where those participating did not have direct experience and interaction with the issues concerned in governance. Consequently, democracy in its original formulation was built upon an "ideal environment and a selected class," a "place where a group of independent and equally competent people managed their own affairs spontaneously" (Lippmann, 264, 267). Democratic theory envisioned all voting citizens to be close to the issues at stake in governance and knowledgeable on what should be done. Lippmann explains that although this hypothetical political setting can never and has never existed, modern society has only grown vastly further from the limited setting and populace of democracy's original vision. "Never has democratic theory been able to conceive itself in the context of a wide and unpredictable environment" (Lippmann, 269-270).

Instead, Lippmann argues, the political reality that democratic theory must grapple with is more akin to Plato's image of the cave. Democratic societies are increasingly complex environments where most public affairs occur "out of reach, out of sight, out of mind" (Lippmann, 29). The government's scope of decisions "set[s] armies in motion or make peace, conscript life, tax, exile, imprison, protect property or confiscate it, encourage one kind of enterprise and discourage another, [..] improve communication or censor it, establish schools," and much more (Lippmann, 21). All the while, traditional democratic theory expects its citizens to be able to gather accurate information on this extensive range of issues, form educated opinions on all of these affairs, and finally convey their preferences to their representatives through voting. Lippmann believed this was an impossible role for the public to fulfill due to citizens' fundamental inability to acquire the accurate knowledge needed to make these decisions.

B. The Challenges of Knowledge

Lippmann's argument against the effectiveness of Public Opinion and the public as the primary informant and source of knowledge in political decision-making is fundamentally epistemological. Because the political realm is tasked with addressing such an extensive range of niche issues, Lippmann argues that citizens' understandings' of the majority of these political matters are not based upon their direct experience, but instead based upon "a representation of the environment which is in lesser or greater degree made by man himself" (Lippmann, 15). Lippmann refers to these personalized, constructed realities as 'pseudo-environments.' While our pseudo-environments are the backdrop upon which we understand our lives and political opinions, they also necessarily diverge from reality.

Lippmann spends the first five parts of his book describing in detail the specific epistemological limitations preventing citizens from fulfilling the 'omnicompetent' aspirations of democratic theory. While Lippmann does not make this distinction himself, he describes two types of factors compromising our pseudo-environments, those stemming from our internal bias and subjectivity, and those dependent on our external situations.

1. External Limitations

Part II of *Public Opinion*, "Approaches to the World Outside," describes the external factors that limit individuals' ability to collect accurate knowledge of their political environment. To begin, citizens simply do not have direct access to or contact with the information and events informing most political proceedings. When an individual does not directly experience an event or seek out a piece of information, the knowledge that reaches them is necessarily filtered through others' interests over what the public is to perceive. Thus in the process of informing themselves of political matters, the public is constantly playing a game of telephone, tasked with interpreting truth out of information that comes filtered through a variety of contexts and interests.

The role of informing citizens on public affairs is often placed upon the press. Yet, this institution also contributes to the inevitably distorted nature of political information and messaging. The press is supposed to serve as the chief means of contact with the unseen environment, yet this would necessarily expect newspapers and media outlets to "serve us with truth however unprofitable the truth may be" (Lippmann, 321). The ideal role of the press comes in fundamental conflict with the capitalist economic structures these outlets are subject to (Lippmann, 321). Necessarily intertwined with financial interests influencing the news that gets reported and the group of readers it seeks to appeal to, the press has clear incentives influencing its depiction of the "truth".

Lastly, even if perfect knowledge of public affairs were perfectly accessible to all citizens, Lippmann argues most individuals simply don't have the time or desire to sort through all of the information needed to be an "informed citizen." He holds that the average citizen's political knowledge generally does not extend much further than the issues affecting their immediate life and a quarter of an hour spent reading the news (Lippmann, 59).

2. Intrinsic Human Limitations to Knowledge

The difficulties facing the public in acquiring accurate knowledge do not end with the inaccessibility of political matters and the imperfect means of communication. Rather, as Lippmann writes, "even the eyewitness doesn't bring back a naive picture of the scene" (Lippmann, 79). Our subjectivity as perceiving, judging, human beings also fundamentally inhibits us from ever obtaining a pure understanding of the political realm. In a given moment, we receive so much sensory input that we must necessarily sort through it all in a way that allows us to understand the event. "What [one] imagines to be the account of an event is really a transfiguration of it" (Lippmann, 79). The human mind necessarily forms habits, expectations, and stereotypes to make sense of a world full of information, detail, and subjective experience.

Consequently, our experience of an event is heavily dictated by these stereotypes, beliefs, and expectations. We are not neutral observers, taking in and analyzing all details accordingly. Rather, our identity necessarily maps itself onto our understanding of political matters and what must be done to solve them. This process is much more comfortable and instinctual than readjusting our worldview with every piece of new information. Yet, this simplification and categorization of information according to stereotypes simultaneously leads us to misunderstanding. As Lippmann writes, "the power of individual perception allows for two nations attacking one another, each convinced that it is acting in self-defense [...] They live, we are likely to say, in different worlds. More accurately, they live in the same world, but they think and feel in different ones" (Lippmann, 20).

Lippmann concludes that because the public's knowledge of political affairs is so fundamentally limited in nature, Public Opinion—the voice democratic decisions are supposed to reflect—is necessarily compromised. Lippmann saw American democracy as a system that claimed to facilitate 'self-governing,' but played out as a scramble between big business, political parties, and other interest groups to sway and manipulate the politically distanced and vulnerable public through the distortion of information. Lippmann argues this has led to political decisions and a decision-making body—the public—unable to represent the citizenry's best interest. Built upon his examination of the knowledge informing the public and the public's ability to accurately assess it, Lippmann proposes his solution to this problem: 'organized intelligence'.

C. An Expert Solution

The objective behind Lippmann's solution is visible in its name. He sought to organize knowledge and intelligence, improving the quality of the body of information used to inform political decisions. In his chapter titled "Intelligence Work," Lippmann argues for a

government-appointed group in charge of collecting facts about the environment and reporting these facts to policymakers and legislators. With the emergence of governmental agencies like the Children's Bureau, the Geological Survey, the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Education, etc. during his time, Lippmann viewed his proposed intelligence department as a further extension of these forces. These groups "give representation to persons, ideas, and objects which would never automatically find themselves represented in this perspective by an election," (Lippmann, 380). He saw it necessary for democratic government to further perfect the relationship between accurate knowledge and democratic decision-making by establishing a group of intelligence workers devoted to providing the facts needed to make informed decisions.

Lippmann set out his vision for this alignment: an intelligence bureau with individual branches for each department of the cabinet. These individuals would be completely divorced from political decisions, made up of rational, truth-seeking experts facilitating "between government departments, factories, offices, and the universities; a circulation of men, a circulation of data and of criticism" (Lippmann, 394). These intelligence divisions would manage, organize, and report the complexity of facts and realities so often lost amidst the chaos of the public and the partisan interests of legislators. Lippmann writes, "It is not an accident that the best diplomatic service in the world is the one in which the divorce between the assembling of knowledge and the control of policy is most perfect" (Lippmann, 381-382).

Lippmann's solution to the ineffective public does not cut citizens out of the democratic process, they are still tasked with electing representatives aligned with their views and checking the power and motivations of the government that serves it. Rather, the public is no longer the primary source of knowledge and primary informant of the political environment to its elected legislators. The public would have a less direct influence in informing political decision-making and representing their experiences and interests. Instead, legislators would make decisions for the

country informed by analyses and facts about the social and political environment precisely and objectively collected by intelligence experts. This organizational shift of epistemological responsibility is what Lippmann views as the solution to the ineffective and uninformed public.

D. Misinterpretations of Lippmann

Lippmann's call for an intelligence bureau at the close of *Public Opinion* has led to interpretations of his work as a defense of technocracy founded upon the inadequacies of the public, yet this reading is demonstrably untrue. As previously mentioned, Schudson debunks the notion of Lippmann as an 'anti-democrat,' arguing that Lippmann's text describes nothing beyond a representative democracy directly aided by an intelligence force, a group of individuals uninvolved in the actual decision-making. In closely examining the claims where diverging interpretations of Lippmann's project appear, I believe it becomes clear that Schudson is right in his analysis.

The first instance where Lippmann has been misinterpreted is in his initial claim that the public cannot obtain the quality of knowledge around public affairs necessary to effectively serve as the primary source of knowledge and actor in democratic decision-making. Schudson explains that this claim has been read as Lippmann's viewing voters as "inherently incompetent to direct public affairs" (Schudson, 1033).[4] Yet, Lippmann's concern with the public does not emerge from a dissatisfaction with the intelligence and capacities of the average citizen. As demonstrated earlier, his epistemological concerns do not only refer to the ordinary citizens making up 'the public,' but rather describe all humans at some scale. The public is not ineffective due to poor intrinsic political ability as Lippmann has been read to believe, but as a structural consequence of

[4] One specific example of this interpretation that Schudson refers to in his essay James Carey's in his 1987 publication "The Press and the Public Discourse" in *The Center Magazine.*

the epistemic challenges it faces in gathering the political knowledge needed to recognize and act in its best interests.

The other significant misinterpretation of Lippmann's thought within *Public Opinion* concerns the responsibilities of Lippmann's intelligence bureau. Schudson cites various scholars who have mistakenly understood Lippmann's intelligence bureau as a *governing force* that participates in making policy decisions.[5] If one understands Lippmann's argument for these expert intelligence informants as grounded in a fundamental lack of faith in ordinary citizens as many have, reading Lippmann as an 'anti-democrat' elitist makes more sense. Yet, as outlined earlier, Lippmann specifically states that there must be *no connection* between the assemblers of information and the public-elected partisan policymakers. Lippmann instead views this intelligence bureau as an agency whose job is the collection of objective facts about the environment, to provide a robust and unbiased summary of the perspectives and information around a particular instance of public affairs intentionally separated from political motivations. The intelligence agency is strictly an informant with no participation in governing.

Lippmann's writings evidence no clear belief that individual intelligence experts, partisan legislators, or ordinary citizens are more or less mentally equipped to govern than others. Rather, his mission is effectively 'organizing intelligence'. His agency of experts does not come into conflict with democracy as a means of government organization. Lippmann's task in *Public Opinion* was not a technocratic one, but an epistemological project concerned with better equipping the government to navigate the increasing complexity of the modern political landscape and social world.

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[5] Schudson mainly focuses on tracking the misinterpretations of Lippmann within James Carey's work, a prominent scholar in Media and Communication studies, but mentions also misrepresentations of Lippmann in Thomas Bender and Christopher Lasch's work as well (Carey, 1995) (Bender, 1987) (Lasch, 1995).

Dewey openly disagrees with Lippmann's call for an expert intelligence agency from the beginning of his discussions of Lippmann's work, clearly setting the grounds for debate. Yet, the origin point of disagreement between Dewey and Lippmann is not located in citizens' intrinsic capacities and the possibility of democracy, as it has been made out by some scholars. So, where does the disagreement truly arise that leads them to their differing solutions to the problem of the public? A discussion of Dewey's philosophical task and response to Lippmann in *The Public and its Problems* helps clarify the true nature of the debate.

III. Dewey Responds to Lippmann

In his 1927 book, *The Public and its Problems,* Dewey extensively engages with Lippmann's discussion of the ineffective and disordered public, yet not out of disagreement with the analysis. Dewey also sensed the general apathy and ineffectualness of the 1920s American public and wished to address it. In fact, much of *The Public and its Problems* provides a critique of democracy's functioning at the time very much aligned with Lippmann's. Dewey expresses his concern for the relationship between the public and its government, writing,

> Instead of individuals who in the privacy of their consciousness make choices which are carried into effect by personal volition, there are citizens who have the blessed opportunity to vote for a ticket of men mostly unknown to them, and which is made up for them by an under-cover machine in a caucus whose operations constitute a kind of political predestination. There are those who speak as if the ability to choose between two tickets were a high exercise of individual freedom. But it is hardly the kind of liberty contemplated by the authors of the individualistic doctrine. [...] When the public is as uncertain and obscure as it is today, and hence as remote from government, bosses with their political machines fill the void between government and the public (*The Public and its Problems*, 119-120).

This analysis certainly echoes Lippmann's concerns. However, their differing perspectives become apparent when examining their explanations for the public's dysfunction. Dewey rejected Lippmann's view that the problem was primarily epistemological, rooted in flawed assumptions within traditional democratic theory. Dewey viewed the public's role in informing its government—no matter how epistemologically faulty the information informing their opinions may be—as an indispensable part of the democratic process. He saw the public itself as a malleable force and mode of social organization capable of improvement, yet ineffective at the time due to outdated, individualistic ideology preventing the public from recognizing itself and its self-interest. In contrast to Lippmann, Dewey did not see the public's failure as permanent, but only temporarily 'in eclipse' (*The Public and its Problems*, 126).

Dewey defends the malleable state of the public, asking at the beginning of his book: What is one really referring to when they speak of the public? How and why does this group Lippmann is so concerned with come into existence? Dewey delineates the public as a state called into being when consequences of decisions and actions expand to individuals "beyond those directly engaged in producing them," a necessary result of human association (*The Public and its Problems*, 27). Political states and governments initially come into existence as a means of managing these external consequences affecting members of a community. The state finds its purpose in navigating and providing solutions to the concerns and experiences of the public. These needs cannot be collected and assessed by experts outside the experiences of the people they represent. To best serve its initial purpose for creation, the government body must be as fluidly connected to its citizens' experiences, knowledge, and desires as possible.

Dewey certainly recognized that democracy during his time was not living up to these lofty ideals, yet he did not believe distancing the workings of the governing body further from the experiences and knowledge contained within the general population was a viable solution to

the problem. It is in this disagreement on the nature of the knowledge needed to inform democratic political action and who can collect and access it that the core disagreement leading Lippmann and Dewey to their respective solutions is found. Lippmann saw an intelligence body as able to acquire the political facts needed for legislators to govern a society in the best interests of its public, circumventing the need to improve or depend upon the state of the public itself. Dewey viewed this solution as fundamentally misunderstanding the nature of social and political knowledge and the larger project of democracy.

In his essay "Participation through Publics: Did Dewey Answer Lippmann?" James Bohman discusses the epistemic advantages of Dewey's conception of democratic knowledge over Lippmann's expert knowledge. Dewey understood that "public deliberation is not to find the 'right authoritative perspective' but to have all such perspectives interact and inform each other within the public and in that way open up deliberation, as it is currently constituted, to correction" (Bohman, 52). Expert knowledge "presupposes that intelligence is merely individual in origin and function" (Bohman, 51). Dewey understood the experiences, needs, and interests of a complex society could not be collected and analyzed into definite fact, promising a harmonious solution if gathered most effectively and accurately. Instead, democracy must be understood as a procedure of inquiry and deliberation, able to achieve useful, pluralistic, social knowledge through its *process*. While the complexity of certain elements of our environment does necessitate expertise, "Democratic inquiry is inherently 'unsettled and pluralistic' in ways that the physical sciences are not," Bohman explains (Bohman, 51).

While technically still representative of the people through the election of government officials, Dewey saw Lippmann's solution to the public as completely missing the epistemic benefits of democracy as opposed to more authoritarian methods of political organization. The connection between citizens and their governing built through the deliberation and discussion

establishing Public Opinion and represented in the voting process is what allows for the democratic process to respond to the needs of its people. As Dewey writes, "The man who wears the shoe knows best that it pinches and where it pinches, even if the expert shoemaker knows how the trouble is to be remedied" (*The Public and its Problems,* 364).

A pluralistic conception of social knowledge emerging upwards from the individual experiences of the public was indispensable to Dewey's conception of democracy. To Lippmann's it was not. Lippmann believed that knowledge about a large group of people in flux could be accurately collected and analyzed into factual information, leading him to find a solution to the problem of the public through expertise. Dewey understood that knowledge coming from a few, used to inform a few, would likely fail at representing the best interests of the many.

A. Dewey's Democratic Solution

Dewey, alongside Lippmann, saw the public as an "inchoate, unorganized" force in need of remedy for democracy to effectively function. However, because Dewey understood that the status of the public and its potential for action was constantly changing and heavily influenced by new institutions and modes of association, the conditions hindering the public were able to be improved upon (*The Public and its Problems*, 27). Rather than finding democratic theory epistemologically erred, Dewey believed the massive changes shaping early twentieth century democracies such as industrialization, urbanization, and the increasing complexity and fragmentation of society had led the public into eclipse, unable to identify itself or its best interest.

> Indirect, extensive, enduring and serious consequences of conjoint
> and interacting behavior calls a public into existence having a common interest in controlling these consequences. But the machine age has so enormously expanded,

> multiplied, intensified and complicated the scope of indirect consequences, have formed such immense and consolidated unions in action, on an impersonal rather than a community basis that the public cannot identify and distinguish itself. (*The Public and its Problems*, 126).

Dewey did not argue reversing these social and technological changes or returning to a simpler society was needed to reestablish the public. Rather, "the trouble springs from the ideas and absence of ideas in connection with which technological factors operate. Mental and moral beliefs and ideals change more slowly than outward conditions" (*The Public and its Problems*, 141). For the public to identify itself, its interests, and the forces threatening its well-being amidst these new modes of association, Dewey argued a wider and more robust conception of democracy was needed. Dewey envisioned democracy as an idea expanding beyond the state into the everyday practices of community life. Schools, industries, families, and other associations must all assist in directing and educating the public in the practice of democratic deliberation, participation, and the identification of communal interests.

This democratic state can only be achieved through "the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion. That is *the* problem of the public," Dewey argues (*The Public and its Problems*, 208). "Until secrecy, prejudice, bias, misrepresentation, and propaganda as well as sheer ignorance are replaced by inquiry and publicity, we have no way of telling how apt for judgment of social policies the existing intelligence of the masses may be" (*The Public and its Problems*, 209). In direct conversation with Lippmann, Dewey concludes that before considering a transfer of knowledge power from the public to a group of experts, we must first try to improve upon the institutional and epistemological conditions leading to a misinformed and ineffective public.

The communicative conditions that Dewey finds necessary for his vision of an effective democratic public (a reduction in propaganda, secrecy, misinformation, bias, etc) directly respond to the epistemological failures in political communication highlighted by Lippmann. Yet Dewey argues that the remedy to these epistemological failures in communication will be found through increased face-to-face communication, discussion, and participation in local communities. By cultivating better, more democratic communication at the smallest social unit, smaller publics will begin to be identified and eventually extend their reach, forming a larger public and Public Opinion. "Democracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community," Dewey writes (*The Public and its Problems*, 213). While Lippmann sees the public's epistemological failures as necessitating a change in governmental organization, Dewey sees the public as something that can be revitalized through cultivating a democratic ethos beginning with the smallest social units and expanding.

Yet Dewey argued previously that a significant contributor to the ellipse of the public was the scattering of interests and indirect consequences to communities beyond the local, making it more difficult for individuals to identify many of their shared needs and interests. Can larger publics, called into existence as a result of these wide-scale, indirect consequences, identify themselves at this local level? Can the public even recognize its loss of power and remedy itself while lost in a moment of chaos and disorganization? Has visible progress been made over the last century in achieving more effective means of political communication and an engaged and informed public without the implementation of Lippmann's intelligence agency?

While I believe Dewey effectively defends the epistemic importance of the public within a responsive democracy against Lippmann's argument for an expert intelligence agency, he proves once again that it is easier to critique than to provide solutions. Dewey's solution, rooted in the resurgence of local community participation within the public along with more transparent

and effective means of communication, necessarily faces challenges in its implementation when the problem at hand is the ineffective and disorganized public itself.

IV. The 'Lippmann-Dewey Debate' and the State of Democracy in the 21st Century

A century beyond Dewey and Lippmann's initial debate, we are uniquely positioned to evaluate whether the American public has experienced the improvements in the quality of political communication that Dewey found necessary for a revitalized public sphere and Lippmann believed could not be achieved without an intelligence force. By analyzing the political communication environment of today, we can determine whether progress has been made towards the stronger, more informed public of Dewey's democratic vision as well as the effectiveness of both thinkers in understanding and addressing the problem of the public in its current evolution.

A. Political Communication and The Public Today

The political information and communication technologies identified by Dewey and Lippmann as crucially influencing the state of the public have drastically evolved in the past 100 years. In recent years, the medium of political news and information has shifted to primarily digital formats.[6] In particular, social media has emerged in the past decade as among the most common ways of receiving news, with one in five U.S. adults receiving political news primarily through these platforms (Mitchell, et al, 2020). This digitization of information and the increasing prominence of social media as a medium for news has significantly impacted political communication in contemporary American democracy.[7]

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[6] According to Elisa Shearer from the Pew Research Center, "more than eight-in-ten Americans get news from digital devices" (Shearer, 2021).

[7] The scope of influence that digitization has had on the accessibility and quality of information, as well as its impact on democracy is a topic much larger than this paper is equipped to address. Consequently, I focus on data points most clearly relevant to the concerns of Lippmann, Dewey, and my task at hand.

As of 2023, 95% of U.S. adults used the internet, a technology vastly increasing the accessibility of information and allowing citizens near immediate access to political information and news.[8] The more recent emergence of social media platforms has further provided both a digital space for citizens and groups geographically distanced to directly communicate with each other and a means to amplify the voices of groups and ordinary citizens who would not typically have as significant a platform or voice on political matters. These technological advancements significantly improve citizens' access to information, current events, and allow for more direct communication across an expansive, diverse nation. At face value, both these technologies seem to be positive epistemic forces, improving upon the poor the accessibility of information and spaces for communication that Lippmann and Dewey argued contributed to an ineffective public.

Yet, according to a study from the Pew Research Center, 64% of Americans view social media as bad for democracy, with 79% believing that the platforms have "made people more divided in their political opinions" (Wike et al. 2020). Further, as of 2022, 71% of Americans feel that they have little to no influence on their country's politics, even while 64% of Americans view social media as leading to more informed citizens (Wike et al. 2020). Why has an increase in access to diverse views led to increased polarization? Why would greater access to knowledge over public affairs still leave 71% of citizens in a democracy feeling disconnected from their government's decision-making process?

While ordinary citizens are allowed a voice in political deliberation and the shaping of Public Opinion through these platforms more than ever before, the prominence of unchecked, unaffiliated voices has led to previously unseen levels of misinformation and propaganda. An astounding 84% of Americans believe access to the internet and social media has made people "easy to manipulate with false information and rumors" (Wike, et al. 2020). In a poll asking what

[8] This statistic comes from Olivia Sidoti with the Pew Research Center (Sidoti, 2024).

percent of users believed they saw “untrue content every time or almost every time they used the platform,” the percentages of users finding this to be true ranged from 27%-47% among the top 5 platforms (Vigderman, 2024). Additionally, due to the profit and engagement-motivated nature of many of these platforms, algorithms select user-specific content to be pushed to viewers on many of these platforms that have grown into important realms for the dispersal of political information and the deliberation on its affairs. This content is catered to the interests of the user, pulling individuals into tight spheres of political ideology whose truth is constantly affirmed by the continual feeding of ideologically aligned content. These emerging issues have shown themselves as important epistemic influences on the knowledge informing the public and subsequently, the function of democracy.

These findings suggest that even with the emergence of technologies able to increase the accessibility of information and communication, the disorganized and divided public seems to persist. As the digital age of information and news has grown into maturity, its potential harms have become more visible and concerns over its functioning have increased. While many of the epistemological concerns leading to an ineffective public that Lippmann was able to identify have been somewhat remedied such as accessibility, contact, and the diversification of voices, new epistemological concerns have evolved out of these new technologies.

B. Adapting Dewey to the Present

The question of how to cultivate a well-informed, politically engaged, democratic citizenry and if it is truly possible at all is clearly important in today’s political environment. These are problems that have not been solved in the century since Lippmann and Dewey’s exchange. Lippmann’s intelligence force, largely denounced as undemocratic in spirit, does not seem to provide a solution to the ineffective public. But, neither has American democracy seen flourishing local community life revive the public as Dewey desired. Where did Dewey and

Lippmann's solutions go wrong? Can progress still be made towards advancing their vision for an engaged and informed democracy?

Dewey argues in *The Public and its Problems* that the chaos and disorganization of the public is not a determined fact, but a malleable state. While he sees its revitalization occurring at the local community level and expanding outward, I argue this approach limits the scope of his own thinking. Dewey recognizes, "We have inherited, in short, local town-meeting practices and ideas. But we live and act and have our being in a continental nation state" (Dewey, 113). He even makes a series of statements between *The Public and its Problems* and his collection of essays *Individualism Old and New* around the importance of adapting to and making positive use of new technologies for positive democratic change.[9] Yet, he does not take the final step towards reconceptualizing how democratic communication would need to evolve in a world where political and social associations have grown so far beyond the local community, as they were beginning to do in his time.

Digital life has not only changed the information and communication landscape but expanded where communities and spaces of inquiry and deliberation are found. Because technological advancement has dispersed indirect consequences and the public itself across the globe, I argue that its rediscovery will not occur primarily in local communities, but in the political spaces of today. Digital platforms have provided spaces where the indirect consequences affecting individuals extending far beyond local communities can be identified and discussed, forming new publics. These expansive groups of individuals with common interests made possible by digital communication are uniquely able to represent and account for the far-reaching problems emerging in the twentieth century that Dewey was concerned with. The

[9] Here Dewey refers to the recent emergence of the radio as a technology that must be embraced for democratic change. In our time, the clear technological parallel is the rise of the internet and artificial intelligence.

question of today then becomes: How do we combat the epistemological dangers of these platforms to instead facilitate the emergence of a healthy, informed, democratic public able to emerge and deliberate like never before?

C. Imagining Democratic Solutions

I argue that between Dewey and Lippmann, we already hold all the tools necessary to address this question and the problem of the public in its digital evolution. Once the notion of debate and a strict division of thought between Dewey and Lippmann is dispelled, the strengths of both thinkers can work together to provide us with a complete means to consider and address the problem of the public today: Dewey's vision for and belief in democracy assisted by Lippmann's astute understanding of the importance of the epistemic conditions of communication on the functioning of democracy. We must first have a conception of an ideal relationship between democracy, the public, and its communication practices. This is found within Dewey's conception of democracy; a communicative, participatory practice beginning at home and extending to governance, founded upon pluralist, public knowledge rather than factual expertise. Then, we must use this ideal to orient a practical approach to addressing the epistemological issues Lippmann identified as embedded within political communication, still inhibiting the public today.

What could this approach look like? Dewey writes extensively in *Individualism Old and New* about the technological and economic changes affecting human life and association and the sluggishness of social knowledge to adjust to these changes. While Dewey deals primarily in this text with the dysfunctional relationship between financially motivated industry and social progress, his thinking can be applied to the progression of communication technologies as well. Dewey argues that the public must stop accepting the "utilization of science and technology for ends of private and pecuniary gain" and instead embrace and work towards democratic goals

through “socially planned and ordered development” (*Individualism Old and New*, 49, 58). Rather than passively allowing media and information technologies to progress upon a singular, deterministic path dictated by a range of financially motivated external factors, we can exercise control over how these technologies shape our lives. Consequently, if the current progression of these technologies harms democracy—as previously highlighted evidence suggests—we are able to exercise social intelligence towards the creation of new and the revision of old technologies to align with our social goals.

Lippmann identified many of the epistemological harms that have taken shape within communication technologies today that need to be addressed. The *external* epistemic factors inhibiting the public, such as misinformation, financially motivated platforms, and polarization-increasing algorithms are certainly malleable forces that can be improved upon. Consequently, the questions we must begin to consider are: How can digital technology be harnessed to create inclusive platforms that promote democratic deliberation? Could technology assist in revitalizing the connection between the public, their elected representatives, and political decision-making? What steps can be taken to mitigate misinformation, propaganda, and the funneling of beliefs in these spaces?

Taking these practical steps is not an impossibility. A study conducted by Ro’ee Levy published in *The American Economic Review* on Facebook news consumption found that “exposure to counter-attitudinal news decreases negative attitudes towards the opposing political party.” Through taking steps as simple as modifying algorithms on social media platforms to push more bipartisan information or creating new platforms designed for political discussion devoid of this user-responsive content, progress toward a more cohesive public can be realized.

We can also take steps as a society to reduce the potency of our *intrinsic* epistemic barriers. By educating the public to more effectively navigate information and communicate on

these digital platforms, we can adapt *ourselves* to a new medium of communication and reduce our susceptibility to the negative external forces at work on these platforms. Although Lippmann argued that structural change was needed to overcome the epistemic limitations of the public, even he wrote, "Enough has been done to demonstrate, I think, that unseen environments can be reported effectively, that they can be reported to divergent groups of people in a way which is neutral to their prejudice, and capable of overcoming their subjectivism" (Lippmann, 395-396). In describing how the individuals in his intelligence bureau could be trained to effectively and non-biasedly complete their task Lippmann claims, "civic education can become a preparation for dealing with an unseen environment." Education could "make the pupil acutely aware of how his mind works on unfamiliar facts" (Lippmann, 408). While the epistemic limitations coming along with our subjectivity are never fully avoidable, even Lippmann admits that through education—an idea central to Dewey's conception of a functioning democratic society—they can be improved upon.

V. Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that misreadings of Lippmann's *Public Opinion* have led to the wide-scale acceptance of Lippmann's thought as in opposition to Dewey's democratic vision. Rather, both Dewey and Lippmann desired a more transparent, communicative, and effective American democracy attuned to the needs of its people; they just disagreed on what steps were needed to achieve this. The popular reading of Lippmann as an 'anti-democrat' has shut his insight out of democratic theory in a political moment when his analysis of the epistemological influences upon the public and politics is most relevant and beneficial to consider.

While both Lipmann and Dewey's respective solutions to the ineffective public find themselves limited—Lippmann's in its conception of the knowledge needed to govern a society, and Dewey's in its incomplete application—the strengths of each thinker can be utilized to direct

us toward solving the problem of the public today. Lippmann's epistemic diagnosis of the problem of the public can work *alongside* Dewey's vision for a rejuvenated, participatory public and democracy rather than against it. Lippmann sheds light on the challenges facing democracy in today's digital age and how they can be improved upon. Dewey's vision of democracy, on the other hand, offers us a theoretical basis for envisioning the democratic possibilities of modern technologies.

As Dewey writes in *The Public and its Problems,* "We have the physical tools of communication as never before" (*The Public and its Problems*, 142). "When the machine age has thus perfected its machinery it will be a means of life and not its despotic master. Democracy will come into its own, for democracy is a name for a life of free and enriching communication. [...] It will have its consummation when free social inquiry is indissolubly wedded to the art of full and moving communication" (*The Public and its Problems*, 184). I argue if directed correctly, information and communication technologies can assist in a more vigorous and informed public rather than threaten this aspiration.

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