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PUNDIT FOR POST-INDUSTRIAL TIMES?

Walter Lippmann as an Information Society Theorist

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Introduction

Walter Lippmann (1889-1974) was one of the most distinguished commentators of the late-industrial epoch. As a prominent pundit—‘the writer who professes to interpret and to criticize current events in social affairs’ (Lippmann 1937, p. 3)—in what it is now safe to call the golden era of the press, his long-running op-ed piece *Today and Tomorrow* was syndicated in hundreds of American newspapers, as well as being eagerly received in capital cities across the globe; his was also the flagship column for the start-up *Newsweek*. A wordsmith of marvellous productivity, dexterity and lucidity, Lippmann coined, or at any rate established, such influential terms as ‘cold war’, ‘public opinion’, ‘public philosophy’, and ‘the manufacture of consent’. His counsel to a succession of presidents literally changed history. He saved Hoover from an asinine invasion of Mexico. For Wilson he formulated most of the Fourteen Points upon which

the post-war international order was based. He improved Kennedy's inaugural speech by changing 'enemy' to the less confrontational 'adversary' in its reference to the Soviet Union. Johnson courted Lippmann more than any, only to fall out over the latter's brave opposition to the Vietnam war. Equally importantly, he was a guide for the ordinary perplexed, a role crassly captured in a *New Yorker* cartoon where a housewife confides that all she needs in the morning is her cup of coffee and Walter Lippmann.

All of this is well-documented (Nimmo & Combs 1992; Steel 1999). Yet Lippmann was more than just a fully paid-up member of the punditocracy, and some of his outputs possessed more than ephemeral value. He was also an original thinker, publishing numerous works of what can broadly be classed as social theory and philosophy, specialising in the problems of modern democracy. It is important to be candid at the outset that he was not 'the most important American political thinker of the twentieth century' (Rossiter & Lare 1982, p. xvi), a distinction now obviously belonging to John Rawls. Nevertheless, it can be argued that Lippmann, who, except for incessant genuflectory citations of his classic *Public Opinion*, has suffered something of a reputational eclipse, remains highly relevant to our time. Indeed, the thesis of this article will be that Lippmann should be read as an important early theorist of the new age, of the 'information society'. If he was a seer of the twentieth century, his piercing gaze reaches down into our own epoch. If he addressed the problems the Great Society posed for democratic theory (Riccio 1994, p. 59), he also foresaw issues dogging Post-Industrial Society and the Network Society (Bell 1999; Castells 2000)—or so I wish to argue.

Specifically, the Lippmann corpus contains materials that can help us with the following important questions. First, what exactly is the role in a democracy of

information, especially in its three key forms of news, opinion and expertise? Second, what is the basic nature of social morality, of the norms that ought to guide collective action, and how can these be translated into a viable (post)modern theory of the good society? Third, are we in danger of succumbing to technological determinism and the power of a technocracy, and if so, what is to be done? Such are clearly critical issues for any intelligent contemporary citizenship.

The approach here will be more reconstructive than historical. That is to say, I shall attempt to isolate—using archival as well as published sources—the most usable elements of Lippmann’s thought from the point of view of their applicability to the information society. This marks something of a departure, in that scholars have tended to stress changes in his analyses and prognoses. For example, a major critical study alleged that Lippmann espoused no less than five distinct, even incommensurable, public philosophies, positions united only by a common style (Wright 1973). That is probably a misrepresentation, missing the substantive commonalities, especially Lippmann’s lifelong commitment to socially-responsible liberal democracy. Nevertheless, it is true that both his ‘world view’ and the shade of his left-leaning politics underwent remodulations, sometimes agonistic ones. However, instead of dwelling overlong on these I intend to locate what is best in Lippmann’s ideas, taking away from the material as a whole the strongest possible synthesis. Although some contextualisation will be helpful, the essential point is to find what works today for the perils confronting our technological, informatised democracies. In this way, I hope to be able to demonstrate that the ‘ideal’ Lippmann will serve admirably as a sentinel for the cyber century.

Information Problems of the Democratic Polity

A popular Government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or, perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance: And a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives. (James Madison, 1822)

The necessity of wide information-dissemination in a democracy is a venerable political truism, one expressed with unsurpassed elegance by the great United States constitution-maker. In up-to-date terms, we might say that an informed citizenry is part of the grammar of the concept of democracy, or that there is an internal relation between a democratic polity and certain kinds of information. It is a nexus upon which Lippmann was uniquely-qualified to comment. To his journalism career and Harvard degree in philosophy and politics, his resumé could add high-level personal experience in war propaganda on behalf of the Allied cause (Lippmann 1965; Steel 1999, pp. 141-154). In this section, I will concentrate on three monographs that the precocious Lippmann devoted to information issues, namely *Public Opinion* (1922) and two shorter works, *Liberty and the News* (1920) and *The Phantom Public* (1993 [1927]). The subject matter of the trilogy can be summed up as the role, both actual and imaginable, of information, particularly in its modes of news, opinion, and science or ‘expertise’, in a complex, large-scale liberal democracy. It is this preoccupation that makes it possible to begin to think of Lippmann as an information society theorist.

The central message of the texts was that modern democracy suffers from a systemic information deficit. The ideal of politics, much like the ‘perfect information’ of classical economics, is a fully-informed citizenry. Such citizens would be capable of

generating the public opinion that is ‘the prime mover in democracies’ (Lippmann 1922, p. 171). But sound public opinion must be based only on ‘objective information’, on facts (Lippmann 1920, p. 57). As this supreme opinion-writer always stressed, ‘we must go back of our opinions to the neutral facts for unity and refreshment of spirit’ (Lippmann 1920, p. 70). The premise of the fully-informed, indeed ‘omnicompetent’, citizen was built into classical and early modern theories of democracy, not least those hammered out by the founding fathers of the United States (Lippmann 1922, pp. 181-182, 243). However, this idyllic model had been realised only in the ancient Greek city-states or the town-hall meetings of the small face-to-face communities of the nascent American republic. Such societies ran on public opinion because their chief disagreements were over judgements based on the same facts, on shared contact with the real or primary environment. There was no need to ‘guarantee the sources of information’ because these were ‘accessible to all’, or, at any rate, to all male property-owners (Lippmann 1922, p. 185).

Unfortunately, such was by Lippmann’s day far from still being the case. In complexified conditions of population explosion, industrialisation, and mediated politics, democracy was now radically informationally under-determined. Most people had contact now not with the vast political environment but only with a second-hand reality, a ‘pseudo-environment’ (Lippmann 1920, p. 55). They were like the captives in Plato’s cave, dependent for the ‘pictures in their heads’ on representations concocted by others (Lippmann 1922, p. 24). The basic drawback of public opinion, Lippmann determined (1993, p. 45), is that ‘its relation to a problem is external’. While modern democratic theorists hailed information as the currency of political legitimacy, what they neglected to explain was precisely how the sovereign populace would be kept

informed enough to cast wise votes and make sound decisions. The American founders had legislated for checks and balances, for the education of children, for copyright and the incentivisation of knowledge, but they did invent any institutions of political information. Certainly the public library system was a step in the right direction, yet there were still intolerable information gaps.

In lieu of state provision, the private press had to act as the chief institution of information and opinion, but it was not fulfilling this vital role properly. Indeed, the dysfunctionality of the mass media was at the heart of the problem, according to Lippmann. Newspapers could not cover everything and what they did report they tended to distort by the use of ‘stereotypes’ and other expedients of pressured, space-limited communication (Lippmann 1922, p. 58f.). They fashioned their own reality, a necessarily partial, oversimplified, and stylised one. News, Lippmann insisted, is not co-extensive with truth, but it was the only version of the truth about the wider world that most people could know. Acting upon the masses for perhaps half an hour per day, the press was expected to create a ‘mystical force called Public Opinion that will take up the slack in public institutions’ (Lippmann 1922, p. 243). Moreover, powerful media owners and editors had angles to push, further compromising the objectivity of news. But even if they were reporting pure truth systematically, there was still the problem of cognitive overload. People simply did not have time to absorb information on every issue or the energy to form innumerable opinions. Given that the citizen is too busy, and in many cases too apathetic, it was inevitable that a two-step flow would set in, and mediating institutions would relieve the sovereign citizen of his burden and do his political thinking for him.

This was the intrinsic nature of the media beast, but it was not the whole story.

Newspapers themselves were in any case manipulated by powerful forces behind the scenes. State censorship was only the most obvious. The executive branch of government, armed with exclusive access to inside information by means of official documents, intelligence and cables, ruled through the mass media, largely circumventing parliaments and judiciaries. Even Congress, lacking its own effective means of information other than on local issues, was largely impotent (Lippmann 1920, pp. 59-60). Powerful special interests also knew how to play the media. Employers' organisations, trade unions and the like now had a disproportionate influence on policy; this led to a polity of pressure groups (Lippmann 1920, pp. 61-62). The upshot is that the public finds that it is 'blockaded' from the pure sources of information (Lippmann 1920, p. 11). The fourth estate was just not constituted to do the full resourcing of genuine debates, to supply the 'machinery of knowledge' (Lippmann 1922, p. 244).

Such considerations induced Lippmann to propose greater social control of the means of communication. The press's distorted and episodic searchlight needed to be improved by a new machinery if it were to give a reliable picture of a complex world. Thus Lippmann posited a new information institution, in essence a fifth estate. This took two forms. *Liberty and the News* suggested a publicly-funded, professionally-trained, centralised international news-agency, something approximating what is now the BBC and its clones across the western world, whose role would be to inform policy-makers, press and public alike (Lippmann 1920, pp. 92-94). By *Public Opinion*, however, Lippmann's view had hardened in favour of a full scientification of information-gathering and -distribution, something quite separate from, and apparently superceding, the press. Experts organised into permanent intelligence bureaus—the Census Bureau and Geological Survey were already promising examples—would

prepare the facts exclusively for politicians and other insiders (Lippmann 1922, pp. 249-252). Citing H. G. Wells, Bernard Shaw and other Fabians, this seminal text gave every impression of envisaging a full state-socialism not of the economy but of data and knowledge. The future system of news-information would be comprehensive, continuous, and arguably totalitarian.

The end-result of all this is that in one way or another people are subject to the ‘manufacture of consent’ (Lippmann 1922, p. 169). It is important to be extremely clear here. Those exegetes err who cast Lippmann, as Chomsky and Herman (2002) among others have done, as a fan of propaganda or even, as Frank Webster (2006) alleges, of a milder ‘information management’, of spin. While Lippmann should be credited with coining the phrase—actually in *Liberty and News* (1920, p. 62)—he emphatically does not endorse the practice. On the contrary, his argument is precisely that because public opinion can be controlled it cannot be trusted. However, it must be conceded that there was indeed a realist—that is, elitist—strain in Lippmann’s thought. He did not accept that public opinion was the same thing as the public interest. Lynching was popular but it was anything but democratic. Moreover, public opinion, even if well-informed, is essentially neither wise nor rational. The politician’s real duty is to follow the public interest, not the results of Gallup polls (Lippmann quoted in Rossiter & Lare 1982, p. 99). In a much later work, Lippmann reaffirmed his conviction (1989, p. 42) that the public interest should be defined as ‘what men would choose if they saw clearly, thought rationally, [and] acted disinterestedly and benevolently’.

The Phantom Public drew some sobering conclusions. The public can perform only a secondary and occasional role, helping politicians when they are fighting a just cause, as a reserve of force brought into action during an election or a crisis (Lippmann 1993,

p. 61). The people certainly had the right to decide who should rule; and between elections, they also sometimes had to be listened to. But their role is limited. Lippmann (1993, pp. 115-132) even attempted to lay down a series of formal conditions whereby one could tell in particular instances whether public opinion should be heeded. Barry Riccio (1994, p. 72) accurately characterises these nostrums, which few readers found convincing, as a form of ‘proceduralism’. One might now say too that the role of Lippmann’s public is binary, confined to yes/no decisions. None of this implies that Lippmann was not an authentic democrat (Schudson 2008). He never denied that public opinion in its broadest scope is ultimately the foundation on which political legitimacy in the modern world rests, never gave up on his avowal of liberal-democracy in its fundamental sense as government of the people, by the people, and for the people.

The Post-Industrial Age

This was strong meat, but what is the significance for us of Lippmann’s remarks? It could be argued that the information problems of the democratic polity no longer exist in post-industrial society, at least not in such an acute form. Surely we are light years away from the antediluvian era of information scarcity, when everyone waited with bated breath for the deliverances of a few grand newspapers? We are the information society, the society characterised by an abundance and diversity of information. We enjoy transparency, an open society. The information system is no longer anything like so oligarchic, nor so top-down, nor so censored, nor so provincial. We are no longer helpless hostages of a pseudo-environment. The ‘expressive mechanisms of public opinion’ (Lippmann n.d.) have multiplied. Indeed, our ‘info sphere’ (Floridi 2007, p.

59) is positively bulging, not only because of dynamic global mass media but also courtesy of the web and all the sources, conduits and modalities that that now embraces. Having experienced partial disintermediation, we construct our own pictures in our heads. We have easy access to colossal quantities of raw, unfiltered information; we cannot be blockaded anymore. We watch the proceedings of parliaments on television, follow politician tweets, stay up-to-date with breaking news on blogs, compare online newspapers from all over the world, and fire off freedom of information requests at will. We have the Alexandrian Library on our laps, indeed in our palms, more or less free of charge. We have direct contact with even the most remote environments through webcams and other surveillant devices. And, as Michael Schudson notes (2010), we now also have numerous ‘political observatories’, expert organs of information-gathering and processing, from civil service agencies to political think tanks. So surely opinion in advanced societies must now be as informed and rational as necessary for the functioning of a healthy democratic system?

Some of this may be readily granted, but it is foolish to infer that the information deficit has thereby been eliminated. As a matter of brutal empirical fact, mainstream public opinion is still largely manufactured by a limited, privileged set of media outlets. The ideas in our heads are still put there by more or less the same news agencies, papers and broadcasters. Stereotypes are stubbornly durable. The masses remain deeply suggestible, hardly signalling the demise of mass society. Pseudo-events dazzle more than ever before. Media-caused spirals of silence force uneasy closure to debates, applying sharp pressures to conform, perhaps more so than in the past, especially with sensitive issues in cultural politics: this demonstrates again and again the untrustworthiness of outwardly-expressed viewpoints. The public sphere is dominated

by public relations, advertisers, and pressure groups. Public service broadcasting is everywhere on the defensive. News is less and less treated as a public good worthy of protection from the vagaries of market forces. Intellectual property rights are expanding at the expense of the intellectual commons and open discussion. Governmental and state power-elites and their bureaucracies still rule largely as they please: they have just evolved along with the changing information environment, becoming more circumspect in information and message management, hence usually able to ride out the occasional leak, FOI exposure, or media scandal. One has to deal with the actual, not the potential, and to recognise that the engineering of consent is still standard even among the most supposedly sophisticated electorates. Public opinion, in short, is still a plaything of the powerful.

Moreover, the rosy picture is in any case only (partially) true for some. However narrow and synthetic the pseudo-environment of the reasonably affluent, politically-aware majority, it is far healthier than that of the worst off sections of society. Longstanding information inequalities persist, now complicated by the unwelcome phenomenon of digital divides (e.g. Norris 2001; Gilbert 2010). To social stratifications originating in the economic setup and property relations have been added new forms of estrangement, marginalisation and excommunication. Even Japan, arguably the first and greatest 'joho shakai' (info-communications society) is still very much a 'kakusa shakai' (gap society). And of course, divisions of all kinds, not least informational, are growing inexorably between nations, as the World Summit on the Information Society registered. There is a new mode of information, to be sure, but the emergent world is still composed of unequal and under-informed electorates. The progressive politics of information, frankly, are still in their infancy. 'For decades', Susan Herbst (1999, p. 88)

concur, ‘we have believed that the information revolution—the expansion of the mass media into all aspects of our lives—would enable common folks to rise to the ideal-typical behavior and knowledge levels expected of them in democratic theories. Yet with each passing decade we realize just how far American democracy is from the imagined democracies of our founders, and it was the skeptical and erudite Lippmann who first brought us the bad news’.

Lippmann’s observations should also give us pause for thought about the utopian claims made on behalf of cyberdemocracy. His early books inspired a response at the time from the eminent US philosopher John Dewey. In his reviews and then in *The Public and its Problems* (1927), Dewey stood for direct democracy against Lippmann’s formulas for representative government. This debate has occasioned a considerable recent literature, most of it predictably siding with Dewey (Whipple 2005; Crick 2009; Allan 2010). Dewey’s ideas are seen as being more in harmony with the political ideals of the information age, in particular with the vision of an internet-facilitated ‘comeback’ of participatory democracy (Whipple 2005: 157). Yet Lippmann’s work points to the dangers in this ‘deliberative turn’ (Dryzek & Dunleavy 2009, p. 216; see also Robbin et al. 2004). The inflated view of human agency that the Network Society is encouraging could be delusional. Pushbutton voting simply places too much faith in public opinion, running the old risk of a crude majoritarianism. We are already seeing this tendency in the trend of ‘flashmobs’, instantaneous mass-protests coordinated on social network sites, which have much in common with the lynch mobs of the industrial era. The dangers of emotionalism, of unreflective action, of people voting or protesting from deep inside their pseudo-environments, their opinions made up largely of stereotypes, are arguably essentially the same as they were in the heyday of the Ku Klux Klan.

The issue is not the worthiness of deliberative democracy as an ideal, but its applicability to real life. Lippmann saw that true discursive freedom is not about a ‘series of separate soap boxes’; it can ‘achieve its essential purpose only when different opinions are expounded in the same hall to the same audience’ (Lippmann 1939?, pp. 11-12). The model is not an internet galaxy of innumerable separate worlds but the focused cut-and-thrust of the American Senate or the British Parliament (Lippmann 1939?, p. 13). More recently, Stefan Rummens (2012) has explained these merits of representative institutions, of what he calls the ‘stage’ over the ‘fora’ and ‘network’ conceptions of democracy. Caution should not entail that we have to settle entirely for Lippmann’s binary public, surveilling at a distance the office-bearers of the ‘procedural republic’—to borrow Michael Sandel’s (1996) excellent descriptor—with only an occasional yes-no decision. However, it does mean that we should recognise that democracy’s pendulum may be beginning to swing a little too wildly from elitism to populism. At the very least, disaffected citizenries need to face up to the fact that democracy will not be restored by ‘imagining that some new political gadget can be invented’ (Lippmann quoted in Rossiter & Lare 1982, p. 186).

Nevertheless, Lippmann’s work can spur radical thinking about the possibility of new information institutions. He was correct that democracy—in whatever form—will only realise its optimal potential when there is a much more efficient and comprehensive supply of information, especially hard-news information. What is plain in this post-industrial epoch is that there is a lingering cybernetic problem, in the sense that no one can honestly say that we have, not even in the most progressive polities, pure information flowing into decision-making and politics being continuously refined by systematic feedback from sound public, scientific, or political opinion. The solutions

Lippmann toyed with, especially those involving expert, centralised systems, are probably past their sell-by dates. There may still be a strong case for the maintenance of large-scale public service broadcasting operations, but that type of institution will not be able to single-handedly informatise the democracies of the future. Something additional, an institution or set of institutions specially attuned to a networked, distributed, and globalised socio-technical environment, seems to be needed. Musing on the Lippmann-Dewey debate, Scott Aikens (1999, p. 190) professes himself hopeful that ‘with distributed systems as the building blocks of a new machinery of knowledge, a new politics of personal liberty within socially cohesive communities might be a realistic aim’. Perhaps, perhaps not. But information society theorists will certainly soon need to come up with the blueprints of the institutional infrastructure for a well-ordered post-industrial polity.

Normative Foundations of Public Policy

The demythologising of public opinion is all very well, but from where then can we find the ethical coordinates of political action? How do we rise above the ‘gangster level’ (Lippmann 1937, p. 15) of propaganda and force? More particularly, where does Lippmann’s critique leave information societies like our own, beset as they are by the ‘widespread fading of certitudes’ (Castells 2006, p. 6) and the ‘breakdown of social norms’ (May 2003a)? Like his British contemporary R. H. Tawney, Lippmann was at heart a social moralist, a spectator of the militarized zone between moral values and political order, and he would have agreed with the radical professor that the challenge is not so much the accumulation of information as ‘to have a keen sense of right and

wrong' and to 'realize that the conceptions "right and wrong" apply to *all* relations of life' (Tawney 1972, pp. 30, 79). But if so, how do we arrive at these conceptions and what exactly is their content? Lippmann's whole career can be read as a response to that question, as a journey in pursuit of the criteria of moral-political truth. The fact that his eventual answer—natural law—is even less popular today than it was when Lippmann announced it, does not necessarily mean that he was mistaken.

In his early work, Lippmann had articulated the positivism and relativism that held sway over much of the intelligentsia of his day. Repudiating traditional morality in both *A Preface to Politics* (1913) and *A Preface to Morals* (1982), he championed science, especially social science, not least in the shape of Freudian ideas about the prevalence of the irrational in human behaviour. 'Our conscience', he assured his readers, 'is not the vessel of eternal verities' (Lippmann 1913, p. 59). In *The Phantom Public*, too, he inveighed against absolutism. 'Even the successful practice of a moral code would not emancipate democracy. There are too many moral codes (Lippmann 1993, p. 20). While he recognised that, within the boundaries of a single society, there could be a common code, a political theorist who asks that a local standard be universally applied is merely begging one of the questions he ought to be trying to solve (Lippmann 1993, pp. 20-21). For the political order that we recognize as good, he wrote in pragmatist style, is one suited to 'our needs, hopes, and habits' (Lippmann 1993, p. 23). Bluntly, there is no point appealing to 'a universal moral code, which, in fact, does not exist' (Lippmann 1993, p. 25).

These youthful dogmas could not satisfy for ever. The crisis of modernity demanded better answers:

In an incredibly short time, a mechanical and industrial revolution has altered the whole pattern

has altered the whole pattern of American life. It has uprooted millions from the land and thrust them into a strange, incomprehensible, and rapidly changing environment. So vast, so deep, so pervasive are the effects of this upon the premises of our conduct, upon the internal economy of our own spirits, that we find ourselves not only without common publicly acknowledged standards of action but oftener than not without clear personal convictions as well. (Lippmann 1931, p. 5)

In his later work, notably *The Good Society* and then *The Public Philosophy*, Lippmann came round to the view that there is, in fact, just such an objective moral order, one which lays down norms of conduct, a ‘natural’ or ‘higher law’ that translated into ‘traditions of civility’ for both private and political life (Lippmann 2005 [1937], p. 352; 1989 [1955], p. 3; see also Diggins 1991). This, the ‘perennial philosophy’ (Lippmann quoted in Rossiter & Lare 1982, p. 132), comprises a system of universal norms deriving from the nature of things and standing over and above all man-made statutes. ‘That which is lawful for all stretches endlessly through the broad aether and the vast brightness’, Empedocles had written *circa* 450 BC (Barnes 1979, p. 123). In a timeless, transcendent realm of unshakeable ‘oughts’, Lippmann believed that he too had found, at last, the pre-political foundations of constitutional democracy. And this natural law, not pragmatism or other mode of modernism, should comprise the ‘public philosophy’ of the US—indeed, any progressive—polity.

Lippmann’s understanding of natural law centred on a conception of the dignity of the person. Man is not just a thing, a chemical object, but has an inner essence (Lippmann 2005, pp. 351, 379). He does not belong to the state, because he belongs to another ‘realm’, a spiritual one (Lippmann 1989, p. 150). And men (he included women) are created equal (Lippmann 2005, pp. 346-351). The body of basic moral intuitions constitutive of natural law points in certain directions for human co-existence.

It underwrites a set of human rights and duties, thereby supplying, at its best, a solid normative foundation for political liberalism. While difficult to pin down forensically, certain general rules were an obvious part of its core. These include proscription of practices such as cruelty, torture and the killing of the innocent, alongside prescription of such duties as reciprocity, assistance to neighbours and strangers, child welfare, protection of the environment, liberty of conscience, speech and religion, and humanitarianism (Lippmann 1989, pp. 79-80, 117). All such rules are non-negotiable: Lippmann would have heartily joined Rawls (1971, pp. 2-3) in asserting that ‘people possess an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society cannot override’, that ‘the rights secured by justice are not subject to political bargaining or to the calculus of social ends’.

Unlike Rawls and most other latter-day liberals, however, Lippmann perceived that social morality must sometimes act as a conservative force, including in the regulation of information flows. For example, he took what today looks like a strikingly moralistic line against obscenity. He used the editorial columns of the *World* to denounce a David Belasco Broadway play called *Ladies of the Evening*, whose ‘purpose is to go just a little further than any other manager has gone in presenting the dirty accompaniments of vice’ (Lippmann 1924). In terms that would dismay the vast industry of present-day media-studies apologists for what used to be called smut, he saw no place for pornographic magazines on news-stands. ‘There is no more reason’, he thundered, ‘why these things should be displayed on the streets than that the garbage should be dumped in City Hall Park’ (Lippmann quoted in Steel 1999, p. 209). ‘Believing as I do in freedom of speech and thought’, he clarified on another occasion, ‘I see no objection in principle to censorship of the mass entertainment of the young’ (Rossiter & Lare 1982,

p. 448). So Lippmann, like many another old-school public philosopher, realised that freedom of speech is not absolute, that liberty should not degenerate into license. However, he also grasped that the level of censorship depends logically on the nature of the medium and in particular on its degree of opportunity for response, or what we would call interactivity (Lippmann 1939?, pp. 15-16; Rossiter & Lare 1982, pp. 232-233)—and on this principle, we may presume to infer, the internet should remain less regulated than television and other monological mass media.

Moreover, if natural law pointed right on cultural issues, it swung leftwards in economics. While it upheld private property, natural law also demanded responsible stewardship of resources. Just wages and prices, public amenities, educational provision, sharing of wealth, relief of the poor, duties of care—in short, the welfare state: all these were priorities of a civilised society and all of them Lippmann felt able to deduce from natural law. Even radically counter-intuitive policies such as Keynesian deficit-financing, which would hardly be appreciated by majority opinion, were supportable by natural-law reasoning. It must be conceded that Lippmann's socioeconomic position underwent revisions (Wellborn 1969; Jackson 2012). There are undeniable differences between the Webbs- and Wallas-citing *Preface to Politics* and the Mises- and Hayek-citing *Good Society*, but they can be exaggerated. In the former, Lippmann could be heard warning against Marxism, and in the latter his political economy still found substantial space for state interference. The truth is that Lippmann was always against the extremes of both proletarianism and plutocracy, always safely within the boundaries of the centre-left, of social democracy. He was a lifelong subscriber to socialism in Daniel Bell's (1996, p. xii) undoctinaire sense of 'a judgment on the priorities of economic policy'. Indeed, the closer one inspects his political

philosophy, the more one is inclined to say of Lippmann what Bell famously said of himself (1996, p. xi), that he was ‘a socialist in economics, a liberal in politics and a conservative in culture’.

The profound normative resource that Lippmann identified as the basis of a viable public philosophy is accessible to the faculty of reason. Indeed, reason is the representative within us of this universal order. ‘There are certain principles’, he insisted, ‘which, when they have been demonstrated, only the willfully irrational can deny’ (Lippmann 1989, p. 114). ‘The rational order’, he explained further—anticipating by more than a generation the content and even vocabulary of Rawls’s seminal *Political Liberalism* (1996)—‘consists of the terms which must be met in order to fulfill men’s capacity for the good life in this world. They are the terms of the widest consensus of rational men in a plural society. They are the propositions to which all men concerned, if they are sincerely and lucidly rational, can be expected to converge’ (Lippmann 1989, p. 123). As a genetic human trait, natural law could be a platform for a rough-and-ready cosmopolitanism. More than that, ‘men who live in this tradition are capable of brotherhood’ (Lippmann quoted in Rossiter & Lare 1982, p. 166). There was no elitism here. On the contrary, by being so broadly available, natural law was profoundly populist, unlike the sophisticated ethical systems of the intelligentsia.

Toward the Good Information Society`

Naturally, Lippmann’s conversion to natural law was not received enthusiastically by most of his peers (Steel 1999, p. 496). The weightiest criticism came from Benjamin

Wright, an expert on the history of natural law. According to this scholar, there were at least eight different interpretations in the US alone between the 17th and 20th centuries, ranging in political colouring from ‘extreme radical’ to ‘ultraconservative’ (Wright 1973, p. 143). Calling Lippmann’s own interpretation ‘facile’, for example in its over-reliance on ‘antithesis’ when ‘what is needed is the making of distinctions’, he concluded that his espousal of natural law was basically ‘out of joint with his time’ (Wright 1973, pp. 146, 150, 153). It would play even worse, of course, with most intellectual trends in our own day. From Anglo-American analytical philosophy to European postmodernism—not to mention the recent ‘pragmatic turn’ back to Pierce, James and company (Bernstein 2010), these being precisely the influences Lippmann shook off—the attack on foundationalism in general, and natural law in particular, has been relentless. The legacy of positivism still makes us suspicious of anything that cannot be proved in a test tube or by mathematical demonstration. And Foucauldian arguments to the effect that all truth claims are in any case infested by power, a stance that of course goes back to Marx and Mannheim, have also made a major impact. There is some support for natural law, ‘neo-Thomists’ such as John Finnis (2011) and, among Protestants, ‘public theology’, a school which may even have been inspired by Lippmann (Forrester 1997, p. 199). But they are still very much on the periphery of modern thought. ‘The prospects of a “deep” or “thick” public philosophy’, George Carey fears (2001, p. 26), ‘seem out of the question for some time to come’. Indeed, he concludes that ‘the evidence is overwhelming that the restoration of even a “thin” public philosophy is highly improbable’ (Carey 2001, p. 27; see also Bohman 1999).

The idea of natural law was and always will be grossly unfashionable, but for its defenders that is just an indication of its validity. ‘The public philosophy cannot be

popular', Lippmann stated forthrightly (1989, p. 162). Humans have two selves, the higher and the lower, the rational and the barbaric, and life is a continual struggle to assert the former over the latter. If natural law were popular, the world would be a very different place, it would be an Eden. Such a conception, at its best, acts as an antidote to the 'acids of modernity' (Lippmann 1982) and, *a fortiori*, of postmodernity. Indeed, the public philosophy *qua* higher law is the consummation of the critique of fickle, free-floating, self-interested public opinion. Lippmann had always believed that it is the pundit's duty to elucidate the nature of the good society and it was only here, in an unashamed return to first principles, that the *vox pop* could really meet its match. Or in older political language, it enabled him to affirm *lex rex* against *rex lex*, that law, not the king, or the state, or even, in a sense, the public, is sovereign. This was how one could justify the priority of essence over appearance, reason over emotion, justice over mob rule.

The information society has long wanted some such input, as its master mind intimated. In an afterword to *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, a text that had cited Lippmann frequently and respectfully, Bell (1996, p. 298) hinted at his own late move to natural law. He said that he had come to see that the antinomianism of the twentieth century could not sustain political liberty or any other civilised value. 'There is a need to affirm a single standard of human rights, without which no individual has recourse against the arbitrary power of the state to degrade, torture, and slaughter those who dissent from that power'—which is what, suggested the father of post-industrialism, 'a doctrine of "natural law" would provide' (1996, pp. 337-8). It might seem perverse for post-industrialism to want to appropriate a doctrine so far removed from any appeal to science or technology, but perhaps at a deeper level the paradox

disappears. In a famous broadcast to the British nation as it braced itself for Hitler, C. S. Lewis (1942, p. 30), another thoughtful contemporary, said that the whole point about the idea of a universal moral law was that it gave us ‘inside information’ about the constitution of the universe and even the meaning of life. In that profound sense it can surely provide some kind of basis for a normative theory of the information society. Who knows? Natural law may even prove to be our best tool for tackling the staggering problems that will bedevil us throughout this century, of digital and other information divides, of privacy *versus* surveillance, of the sustainability of freedom of information and opinion, of superpowers over-against international law, of the governance of space and cyberspace.

Endgame? The Future as Technocracy

There is another factor which—above and beyond the preoccupation with information’s role in society, and the moral and political implications thereof—tips the balance decisively in favour of a reinterpretation of Lippmann as an information society theorist: his engagement with, in Heideggerian parlance (1977), ‘the question concerning technology’. It is a schoolboy error to think that the information society is solely about computers and telecommunications. However, a comprehensive understanding of the process of informatisation does indeed need to include an analysis of its technological, and especially information-technological, dimensions, and it is my contention that the Lippmann oeuvre provides enough in this respect. We have, in particular, an unfinished manuscript, *The Ungovernability of Man* (1970), written towards the end of his life, where Lippmann set down his mature thoughts about the

prospects of civilisation in the technological world that he saw crystallising rapidly around him. One or two scholars have noticed it (e.g. Whitfield 1981, p. 68), but none, as far as I am aware, has highlighted it. Incomplete though it was, this fascinating fragment demonstrates that Lippmann had a share of the rare gift possessed by the best pundits: an ability to look into the future. In this final section I will let his voice speak loudly, keeping exegesis to a minimum.

As noted above, young man Lippmann had put much of his faith in the special mode of information that is called science. He expected, as many of that era did, that social problems no less than natural ones would soon melt under the concentrated fire of the scientific method. Science seemed indeed destined to govern politics. Fretting over the information dilemmas of democracy, as we have seen, Lippmann specifically recommended an intelligence bureau running the show. In some ways, it might be said, this Lippmann resembled the Bell of the 1970s (e.g. 1971; 1999 [1973]; see also Miller 1976), extolling a post-industrial society based on the codification of theoretical knowledge, that is, big science, and its systematic application to government policy.

The unpublished manuscript confirms a change of mind, and of mood. The mature Lippmann did not negate science, of course, but now he could see more clearly its drawbacks. ‘Only in our time, only in the twentieth century,’ he writes (1970, p. 1), ‘has the application of science been developed to a point where scientists are capable of changing radically not only the environment of man but intervening drastically in the nature of man himself’. This high-tech scenario has brought ‘the promise of the creation of a new environment and of a new social order’ (1970, p. 2). And information and communication technologies have been a key driver, alongside nuclear power, contraception and pharmaceuticals. ‘Telecommunication’, Lippmann notes, reprising

his epistemological concerns although now the problem was not too little but too much popular contact with the outer world, 'has placed men beyond the limits of their direct knowledge and beyond the limits of what is familiar to them' (Lippmann 1970, p. 4). Moreover, the scale and pace of the changes are phenomenal. Sounding very much like Alvin Toffler in *Future Shock* (1970) and perhaps also with a hint of Marxian, or at any rate nineteenth-century, determinism, he asserts that 'we can hardly begin to realize the consequences of the condition where a new order already exists within us and within the order to which we belong. It is probable that in historical times there has always been within an established order a new order struggling to be born but change has never been so rapid' (Lippmann 1970, p. 6).

Morally-politically, normatively, the nascent, promethean socio-technical system will present huge challenges. 'In the new technological order', Lippmann writes (1970, p. 3), 'men assume so many of the functions of the gods, that there is little room left for the great central ideological cathedrals of religion and certainty'. 'The conflict between technology and the ancestral order', he proceeds, 'is I believe the central source from which flow our tensions, our disorders and a swelling unease among us' (Lippmann 1970, p. 2). 'The habits', he explains, 'implanted during eons of adaptation no longer agree with needs and functions of the new technological order' (Lippmann 1970, p. 3). Essentially, system is clashing with culture. Furthermore, 'there is little doubt that the technological order will dominate the conflict' (Lippmann 1970, p. 4-A). Specifically, and worryingly, the new system is threatening to extinguish the amalgam of Christian and Enlightenment values that is western culture. 'The ascendancy of the technological order demands a break with the christian values of western civilisation, and also with the revolutionary ideology which, since the eighteenth century, has identified

democracy with egalitarianism', Lippmann writes (1970, p. 4A). The vital principle that was at risk, which lay at the heart of modern western culture, was human equality, the understanding that 'all men are not only equal in the sight of God, but are irreducibly equal as individuals—in their rights, in their status, in their competence' (Lippmann 1970, p. 4A).

The endgame will be a divided society, a brutal technocracy. On the one hand, there will be an elite, the people who possess technology: 'they are the strongest people and they become stronger by using technology' (Lippmann 1970, p. 4A). On the other side, there are the havenots, subject to the 'dominance of a vital technology which few of the ever-growing population understand or are competent to manage, in which a considerable and growing minority are not needed and are not qualified and are not wanted.' (Lippmann 1970, p. 5). This leads not just to drastic socioeconomic turbulence but also to a pervasive governance problem. 'The interactions and interrelationships, which only some imaginary computer could deal with, are, perhaps, enough to intimate the disorders and the discontents and ungovernability of mankind', Lippmann writes (1970, p. 12). And the 'breakdown', he warns, is at all levels, undoing 'not only world government, a world order, but national order and national government and even regional government'. His final thoughts are with the young:

What can old men say to them? For if mankind is to be saved, those who are now young must save it. Yet the young who are so inexperienced and ignorant must somehow, themselves, find the knowledge to save it. What then have the old people learned that can be of any use to the young? (Lippmann 1970, pp. 14-15)

There he breaks off. Lippmann's swansong thus presents a very stark vision, showing little of the subtleties and qualifications, still less the optimism, of his earlier

writing. It is basically a doomsday scenario, technology as unstoppable juggernaut, trashing every cultural relic. I am not suggesting that the manuscript is particularly original or profound. Indeed, it seems to be predicated on the cardinal intellectual sin of technological determinism. But it is still salutary. It puts technology at the centre of Lippmann's social analysis, for the first time. It points to the normative crisis that others today are beginning to grasp. It suggests that we need to look deeper than we normally do when we debate 'governance'. It implies that the real fight now is against technocracy. And it suggests that we need to restart, at a different level and on a wider front, the perennial battle for political liberty and equality. All such propositions should at least be taken seriously. The last words of this modern Socrates surely deserve nothing less.

Conclusion

The role of the pundit is not to soothe; it is to contribute to the public use of reason, to speak truth to power. *Pace* Randall Collins (2011), Lippmann was that kind of pundit, a successful public intellectual who served as a 'bridge' between expertise and policy-making (Goodwin 1995, p. 340). But to his recognised accomplishments an additional dimension now needs to be added—Lippmann as prophet of post-industrialism, as information society theorist. Certainly to a greater extent than either Jurgen Habermas or Anthony Giddens, whom Webster (2006) does not hesitate to include, or the likes of Karl Polanyi and Raymond Williams (May 2003b)—for none of that illustrious group really thematises centrally the concept of information—Lippmann

can be counted among the theorists of the information society *avant la lettre*.

I hope to have demonstrated precisely how Lippmann fulfils this role. He was not just a model commentator, eloquent, informed, and often wise, one from whom both the press and the blogging brigades can learn, but also a serious thinker who produced substantive contributions to questions that have become even more acute than when he wrote. It has been argued that his reflections on the nature of information and its socio-political role, on public opinion and democracy, on liberty, justice and the good society, and on technology, can significantly enhance our understanding of the post-industrial societies in which so many of us find ourselves. We must above all heed his signature mantra that ‘the health of society depends upon the quality of the information it receives’ (Lippmann 1920, p. 80) and, I think, the corollary that it is ultimately the state’s responsibility to protect the flow of pure information. This article has emphasised too that Lippmann’s case for natural law should not be dismissed out of hand. Something, at any rate, needs to be found for the renormativisation of society, for the sourcing of a better infopolitics. In such ways, then, it can perhaps be safely concluded that Lippmann indeed wrote for his tomorrow as well as his today. He can be a sentinel of this cyber century, and so it is entirely fitting that, nearly a hundred years after Lippmann co-founded *The New Republic*, the flagship liberal weekly has been snapped up by one of the founders of Facebook (Stelter 2012).

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