On the Walter Lippman / Hunter S. Thompson Legacy

If the adage “An enemy of my enemy is my friend,” is true, then by logic, “A hero of my hero is my hero” be true. In my brief study of American journalist and political philosopher Walter Lippman, a literary hero to Hunter S. Thompson, it holds up. Lippman is a hero to modern journalism, not just to my to hero.

As a journalist, my objective has always been to boil down some aspect of our complex world into one digestible bitesize morsel. Let people make up their own mind. This is how Lippman’s thinking originated during his days at Harvard at the age of 17, but as he stepped up to the plate more, he noticed there was much more at play in the modern *state of things* that kept the news from revealing the truth.

Early on Lippman considered journalism the vehicle that can be used to “set us free and leave us to find our own way”(X). But he observed that journalism can’t be this pure because people bring pre-conceived notions, beliefs, and they latch onto symbols and slogans more readily than do they seek out truth. Lippman coined the term “stereotypes” to describe this – a word that lives on today.

It was just yesterday at DFW – the airport between Dallas and Fort Worth, Texas - that I boarded a plane and sat next to a 20-something male wearing a red hat with the slogan “Make America Great Again.” The kid has never seen neither a “great” nor a “not great” America, but he’s attached the slogan to symbolism and imagery it evokes- envisioning a rapidly growing an economy he read about in a history, high purchasing power his grandparents enjoyed, crushing our enemies under a patriarchal Christian Caucasian- system with unlimited growth potential and little concern for environmental or Civil rights. 20-year-old-MAGA-boy wants to return to this glorious nation he has never seen, one which never really happened the way he wants to believe. His mind has developed this picture of “A Great Nation” from the news he chooses to consume. All other forms of news or truths put forth, he will claim as false. False means “Not Great,” and he can’t handle being “Not Great!”

At the same time, I’m fuming next to this ignoramus, enlightenment-bringing Lapis crystal necklace dangling around my neck, *The Economist* in hand, deeply judging this bafoon and his vision of “A Great Nation.” I mean, my vision is right, not his! Neither will convince the other to see it our way, while hurling through the skies on the wings of American Airlines. We all have opinions and assholes, and both stink. Ask either of us, ours smells good. It’s the other’s that stinks.

Back to Lippman. In *Public Opinion* he argued people don't care about policy beyond their doorsteps, and they have too many moving mini-machines in the microcosms of their own worlds to meddle in state of national affairs. This leaves us in a precarious situation where we allow lawyers to become the intelligentsia of America. Where we once looked to people of “special wisdom” - priests, elders, teachers – to get things done, we now rely on those who specialize in the manipulation of the law.

To a large degree, Lippman devastates journalists and our profession with the notion of “buying public.” Lippman argues that people don’t care about the truth. They care about what is exciting and entertaining, rather than discovering – as radio commentator Paul Harvey would say - “The Rest of the Story.” This is disappointing, but true. Just turn on what we call the news, and you’ll see the machine rarely makes the screen, but the blurb of the hour hits all the networks at once.

After a dozen years in community radio journalism, I can painfully relate. During my career, I felt a civic duty to attend - and make sense of - the local machinations of Town Council government. Regurgitating these meetings into digestible radio cud - suitable for an audience that is driving kids to school, commuting to work, showering, cooking, gardening, or otherwise, doing anything BUT paying direct attention to the radio – requires the most striking quotes and attention-catching phraseology. OPEN BIG, get out the vitals, and MOVE ON. Hours of meetings, notes, and review of tape, are boiled down into 30-second clips.

What you hear isn’t the truth, but rather, the news. It’s rarely the lawmaking process, the back-and-forth, the who-said-what-to-who, the emotion, the delay, the re-voting, public comment, the thick tensions in the room. The story is designed to keep an audience, at the expense of what truth lies beneath.

Lippman is right when he claims the truth is boring to most people, and when they’re bored, they don’t care. They tune out, they change the channel, in Lippman’s day they’d flip the page. They’ll go find another source that tells them what they want to hear, something entertaining and exciting – rarely the whole truth. And when the “buying public” (XX) goes away, so do the advertisers who ultimately foot the bill for journalists to create content (note: I did not say “do journalism”).

Truth is compromised to retain secure employment. After all, Lippman’s argument is that we really don’t care about affairs beyond our own doorsteps, and why would journalists – in their quest to keep their jobs – be exempt from this proposition? Until grocery clerks take morality credits as payment, greenbacks will continue to dominate our hierarchy of professional needs. Even journalists have bills to pay and mouths to feed.

This puts journalists in a very precarious situation. Do we pander to the masses, the lowest common denominator? Not everyone gets to be an investigative reporter, write for *The Sun, The New York Times,* or *High Country News.* Those outlets have found a way to sell to an audience invested in learning the backstory, or “how the sausage is made,” and they’ve attracted enough of their own “buying public” for that style of journalism. It’s a tiny market segment overall, competing with bold daily headlines and your 24-hour news with motion graphics and an ever-changing cast of characters, one decibel louder or more strikingly visual than the last guest – but not as much as the next. Even in journalism, who you know often precedes what you know and how you can deliver it – it's not a pure discipline whose reward structure is based on merit. So journalists get stuck at papers, online rags, and on the radio – where they report the news and often don’t tell the truth. So, how do you get a job, pay the bills, and hold on to your ideals, your values, your morals while pushing the public envelope? Maybe you don’t. Lippman started wealthy, a lot of us don’t have that luxury.

In *Public Opinion,* Lippman reminds us that we expect newspapers to serve us the truth for a very low upfront cost to the consumer (xxx). Nobody thinks they should have to pay an ounce for news, yet they expect the hard work be done. To get to the truth, we seek out specialty sources. Will we rely on the elite, a class whose self-interest is self-preservation, to guide us to the truth? You can see the danger here.

While I’ve spent hundreds of hours gobbling up Hunter S. Thompson’s tales of backroads, booze, bloodthirsty bats, crooked politicians, tropical getaways, and the relentless Quest for the American Dream, never had I considered chasing insight from his influences. Walter Lippman was idolized by Thompson, and his books now sit on my shelf.

Lippman’s influence on Thompson are evident in his writing style, powerfully chosen words (ex- “doomed”), and overarching themes of disparity, and the Death of the American Dream. Lippman hints at early forms of Gonzo journalism as he opens the final chapter in *Public Opinion with* “I have written and thrown away several endings to this book...In politics the hero does not live happily ever after...The last chapter is merely a place where the writer imagines the reader has begun to furtively look at his watch.” You can feel the contempt Lippman carries for the average reader, who simply wants the news, the flash, the ooh’s and aah’s. They do not seek the truth, and Lippman despises this notion, as does Thompson, as do I. Ignorance does not deserve a pat on the head.

Lippman’s philosophies In P*ublic Opinion,* are further informingmine. We both struggle with the notion that it’s impossible to balance the need of truth from journalists and public’s want of news from producers. If journalism seeks to tell the truth, but the public only wants to hear the whizz-bang, “The Death of the American Dream” is already here. If truth sets us free, but we only want the news, are we free? Does the American public seek the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help us God? Lippman closes *Public Opinion* with “The Lord cannot help you.”

Thompson would say, “Mahalo.”

I say “See you out there.”

Notation

X– Lippman, Walter: *Public Opinion* p. 20

Xx- Lippman, Walter, *Public Opinion* p. 241

Xxx – Lippman, Walter, *Public Opinion* p. 242

Additional Resources:

Wright, Benjamin: *Five Public Philosophies of Walter Lippman*

Lippman, Walter: *The Cold War*

<https://www.learner.org/workshops/primarysources/coldwar/docs/lippman.html>