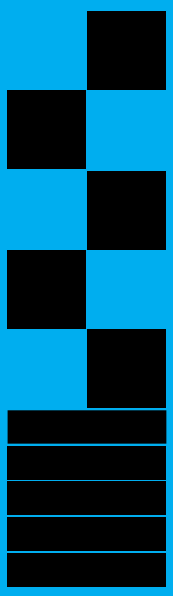
1920

Liberty and the News

Walter Lippmann



a
mediastudies.press
public domain
edition

with a new
introduction by
Sue Curry Jansen

Walter Lippmann

LIBERTY AND THE NEWS

A MEDIASTUDIES.PRESS PUBLIC DOMAIN EDITION

Liberty and the News, originally published in 1920 by the HARCOURT, BRACE AND HOWE, is in the public domain.

Published by MEDIASTUDIES.PRESS in the PUBLIC DOMAIN series

mediastudies.press | 414 W. Broad St., Bethlehem, PA 18018, USA

COVER DESIGN: Mark McGillivray

COPY EDITING: Petra Dreiser

CREDIT FOR SCAN: Internet Archive, from the collections of the University of Michigan, 2008 upload

CREDIT FOR LATEX TEMPLATE: Book design inspired by Edward Tufte, by The Tufte-LaTeX Developers

978-1-951399-02-3 (print) | 978-1-951399-03-0 (ebook)

DOI 10.32376/3f8575cb.2e69e142

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CONTROL NUMBER LCCN NO.

Edition 1 published in November 2020

2 *WHAT MODERN LIBERTY MEANS*

doi | original pdf

From our recent experience it is clear that the traditional liberties of speech and opinion rest on no solid foundation. At a time when the world needs above all other things the activity of generous imaginations and the creative leadership of planning and inventive minds, our thinking is shriveled with panic. Time and energy that should go to building and restoring are instead consumed in warding off the pin-pricks of prejudice and fighting a guerilla war against misunderstanding and intolerance. For suppression is felt, not simply by the scattered individuals who are actually suppressed. It reaches back into the steadiest minds, creating tension everywhere; and the tension of fear produces sterility. Men cease to say what they think; and when they cease to say it, they soon cease to think it. They think in reference to their critics and not in reference to the facts. For when thought becomes socially hazardous, men spend more time wondering about the hazard than they do in cultivating their thought. Yet nothing is more certain than that mere bold resistance will not permanently liberate men's minds. The problem is not only greater than that, but different, and the time is ripe for reconsideration. We have learned that many of the hard-won rights of man are utterly insecure. It may be that we cannot make them secure simply by imitating the earlier champions of liberty.

Something important about the human character was exposed by Plato when, with the spectacle of Socrates's death before him, he founded Utopia on a censorship stricter than any which exists on this heavily censored planet. His intolerance seems strange. But it is really the logical expression of an impulse that most of us have not the candor to recognize. It was the service of Plato to formulate the dispositions of men in the shape of ideals, and the surest things we can learn from him are not what we ought to do, but what we are inclined to do. We are peculiarly inclined to suppress whatever impugns the security of that to which we have given our allegiance. If our loyalty is turned to what exists, intolerance begins at its frontiers; if it is turned, as Plato's was, to Utopia, we shall find Utopia defended with intolerance.

There are, so far as I can discover, no absolutists of liberty; I can recall no doctrine of liberty, which, under the acid test, does not become contingent upon some other ideal. The goal is never liberty, but liberty for something or other. For liberty is a condition under which activity takes place, and men's interests attach themselves primarily to their activities and what is necessary to fulfill them, not to the abstract requirements of any activity that might be conceived.

And yet controversialists rarely take this into account. The battle is fought with banners on which are inscribed absolute and universal ideals. They are not absolute and universal in fact. No man has ever thought out an absolute or a universal ideal in politics, for the simple reason that nobody knows enough, or can know enough, to do it. But we all use absolutes, because an ideal which seems to exist apart from time, space, and circumstance has a prestige that no candid avowal of special purpose can ever have. Looked at from one point of view universals are part of the fighting apparatus in men. What they desire enormously they easily come to call God's will, or their nation's purpose. Looked at genetically, these idealizations are probably born in that spiritual reverie where all men live most of the time. In reverie there is neither time, space, nor particular reference, and hope is omnipotent. This omnipotence, which is denied to them in action, nevertheless illuminates activity with a sense of utter and irresistible value.

The classic doctrine of liberty consists of absolutes. It consists of them except at the critical points where the author has come into contact with objective difficulties. Then he introduces into the argument, somewhat furtively, a reservation which liquidates its universal meaning and reduces the exalted plea for liberty in general to a special argument for the success of a special purpose.

There are at the present time, for instance, no more fervent champions of liberty than the western sympathizers with the Russian Soviet government. Why is it that they are indignant when Mr. Burleson suppresses a newspaper and complacent when Lenin does? And, *vice versa*, why is it that the anti-Bolshevist forces in the world are in favor of restricting constitutional liberty as a preliminary to establishing genuine liberty in Russia? Clearly the argument about liberty has little actual relation to the existence of it. It is the purpose of the social conflict, not the freedom of opinion, that lies close to the heart of the partisans. The word liberty is a weapon and an advertisement, but certainly not an ideal which transcends all special aims.

If there were any man who believed in liberty apart from particular purposes, that man would be a hermit contemplating all existence with a hopeful and neutral eye. For him, in the last analysis, there could be nothing worth resisting, nothing particularly worth

attaining, nothing particularly worth defending, not even the right of hermits to contemplate existence with a cold and neutral eye. He would be loyal simply to the possibilities of the human spirit, even to those possibilities which most seriously impair its variety and its health. No such man has yet counted much in the history of politics. For what every theorist of liberty has meant is that certain types of behavior and classes of opinion hitherto regulated should be somewhat differently regulated in the future. What each seems to say is that opinion and action should be free; that liberty is the highest and most sacred interest of life. But somewhere each of them inserts a weasel clause to the effect that "of course" the freedom granted shall not be employed too destructively. It is this clause which checks exuberance and reminds us that, in spite of appearances, we are listening to finite men pleading a special cause.

Among the English classics none are more representative than Milton's *Areopagitica* and the essay *On Liberty* by John Stuart Mill. Of living men Mr. Bertrand Russell is perhaps the most outstanding advocate of liberty. The three together are a formidable set of witnesses. Yet nothing is easier than to draw texts from each which can be cited either as an argument for absolute liberty or as an excuse for as much repression as seems desirable at the moment. Says Milton:

> Yet if all cannot be of one mind, as who looks they should be? this doubtles is more wholsome, more prudent, and more Christian that many be tolerated, rather than all compell'd.

So much for the generalization. Now for the qualification which follows immediately upon it.

> I mean not tolerated Popery, and open superstition, which as it extirpats all religions and civill supremacies, so itself should be extirpat, provided first that all charitable and compassionat means be used to win and regain the weak and misled: that also which is impious or evil absolutely either against faith or maners no law can possibly permit, that intends not to unlaw it self: but those neighboring differences, or rather *indifferences*, are what I speak of, whether in some point of doctrine or of discipline, which though they may be many, yet need not interrupt the unity of spirit, if we could but find among us the bond of peace.

With this as a text one could set up an inquisition. Yet it occurs in the noblest plea for liberty that exists in the English language. The critical point in Milton's thought is revealed by the word "indifferences." The area of opinion which he wished to free comprised the "neighboring differences" of certain Protestant sects, and only these where they were truly ineffective in manners and morals. Milton, in short, had come to the conclusion that certain conflicts of doctrine

were sufficiently insignificant to be tolerated. The conclusion depended far less upon his notion of the value of liberty than upon his conception of God and human nature and the England of his time. He urged indifference to things that were becoming indifferent.

If we substitute the word indifference for the word liberty, we shall come much closer to the real intention that lies behind the classic argument. Liberty is to be permitted where differences are of no great moment. It is this definition which has generally guided practice. In times when men feel themselves secure, heresy is cultivated as the spice of life. During a war liberty disappears as the community feels itself menaced. When revolution seems to be contagious, heresy-hunting is a respectable occupation. In other words, when men are not afraid, they are not afraid of ideas; when they are much afraid, they are afraid of anything that seems, or can even be made to appear, seditious. That is why nine-tenths of the effort to live and let live consists in proving that the thing we wish to have tolerated is really a matter of indifference.

In Mill this truth reveals itself still more clearly. Though his argument is surer and completer than Milton's, the qualification is also surer and completer.

> Such being the reasons which make it imperative that human beings should be free to form opinions, and to express their opinions without reserve; and such the baneful consequences to the intellectual and through that to the moral nature of man, unless this liberty is either conceded or asserted in spite of prohibition, let us next examine whether the same reasons do not require that men should be free to act upon their opinions, to carry these out in their lives, without hindrance, either moral or physical, from their fellow men, so long as it is at their own risk and peril. *This last proviso is of course indispensable.* No one pretends that actions should be as free as opinions. On the contrary, *even opinions lose their immunity* when the circumstances in which they are expressed are such as to constitute their expression a positive instigation to some mischievous act.

"At their own risk and peril." In other words, at the risk of eternal damnation. The premise from which Mill argued was that many opinions then under the ban of society were of no interest to society, and ought therefore not to be interfered with. The orthodoxy with which he was at war was chiefly theocratic. It assumed that a man's opinions on cosmic affairs might endanger his personal salvation and make him a dangerous member of society. Mill did not believe in the theological view, did not fear damnation, and was convinced that morality did not depend upon the religious sanction. In fact, he was convinced that a more reasoned morality could be formed by laying aside theological assumptions. "But no one pretends that actions should be as free as opinions." The plain truth is that Mill did

not believe that much action would result from the toleration of those opinions in which he was most interested.

Political heresy occupied the fringe of his attention, and he uttered only the most casual comments. So incidental are they, so little do they impinge on his mind, that the arguments of this staunch apostle of liberty can be used honestly, and in fact are used, to justify the bulk of the suppressions which have recently occurred. "Even opinions lose their immunity, *when the circumstances* in which they are expressed are such as to constitute their expression a positive instigation to some mischievious act." Clearly there is no escape here for Debs or Haywood or obstructors of Liberty Loans. The argument used is exactly the one employed in sustaining the conviction of Debs.

In corroboration Mill's single concrete instance may be cited: "An opinion that corn dealers are starvers of the poor, or that private property is robbery, ought to be unmolested when simply circulated through the press, but may justly incur punishment when delivered orally to an excited mob assembled before the house of a corn dealer, or when handed about among the same mob in the form of a placard."

Clearly Mill's theory of liberty wore a different complexion when he considered opinions which might directly affect social order. Where the stimulus of opinion upon action was effective he could say with entire complacency, "The liberty of the individual must be thus far limited; he must not make himself a nuisance to other people." Because Mill believed this, it is entirely just to infer that the distinction drawn between a speech or placard and publication in the press would soon have broken down for Mill had he lived at a time when the press really circulated and the art of type-display had made a newspaper strangely like a placard.

On first acquaintance no man would seem to go further than Mr. Bertrand Russell in loyalty to what he calls "the unfettered development of all the instincts that build up life and fill it with mental delights." He calls these instincts "creative"; and against them he sets off the "possessive impulses." These, he says, should be restricted by "a public authority, a repository of practically irresistible force whose function should be primarily to repress the private use of force." Where Milton said no "tolerated Popery," Mr. Russell says, no tolerated "possessive impulses." Surely he is open to the criticism that, like every authoritarian who has preceded him, he is interested in the unfettered development of only that which seems good to him. Those who think that "enlightened selfishness" produces social harmony will tolerate more of the possessive impulses, and will be inclined to put certain of Mr. Russell's creative impulses under lock and key.

The moral is, not that Milton, Mill, and Bertrand Russell are inconsistent, or that liberty is to be obtained by arguing for it without qualifications. The impulse to what we call liberty is as strong in these three men as it is ever likely to be in our society. The moral is of another kind. It is that the traditional core of liberty, namely, the notion of indifference, is too feeble and unreal a doctrine to protect the purpose of liberty, which is the furnishing of a healthy environment in which human judgment and inquiry can most successfully organize human life. Too feeble, because in time of stress nothing is easier than to insist, and by insistence to convince, that tolerated indifference is no longer tolerable because it has ceased to be indifferent.

It is clear that in a society where public opinion has become decisive, nothing that counts in the formation of it can really be a matter of indifference. When I say "can be," I am speaking literally. What men believed about the constitution of heaven became a matter of indifference when heaven disappeared in metaphysics; but what they believe about property, government, conscription, taxation, the origins of the late war, or the origins of the Franco-Prussian War, or the distribution of Latin culture in the vicinity of copper mines, constitutes the difference between life and death, prosperity and misfortune, and it will never on this earth be tolerated as indifferent, or not interfered with, no matter how many noble arguments are made for liberty, or how many martyrs give their lives for it. If widespread tolerance of opposing views is to be achieved in modern society, it will not be simply by fighting the Debs' cases through the courts, and certainly not by threatening to upset those courts if they do not yield to the agitation. The task is fundamentally of another order, requiring other methods and other theories.

The world about which each man is supposed to have opinions has become so complicated as to defy his powers of understanding. What he knows of events that matter enormously to him, the purposes of governments, the aspirations of peoples, the struggle of classes, he knows at second, third, or fourth hand. He cannot go and see for himself. Even the things that are near to him have become too involved for his judgment. I know of no man, even among those who devote all of their time to watching public affairs, who can even pretend to keep track, at the same time, of his city government, his state government, Congress, the departments, the industrial situation, and the rest of the world. What men who make the study of politics a vocation cannot do, the man who has an hour a day for newspapers and talk cannot possibly hope to do. He must seize catchwords and headlines or nothing.

This vast elaboration of the subject-matter of politics is the root of the whole problem. News comes from a distance; it comes helter-skelter, in inconceivable confusion; it deals with matters that are not easily understood; it arrives and is assimilated by busy and tired people who must take what is given to them. Any lawyer with a sense of evidence knows how unreliable such information must necessarily be.

The taking of testimony in a trial is hedged about with a thousand precautions derived from long experience of the fallibility of the witness and the prejudices of the jury. We call this, and rightly, a fundamental phase of human liberty. But in public affairs the stake is infinitely greater. It involves the lives of millions, and the fortune of everybody. The jury is the whole community, not even the qualified voters alone. The jury is everybody who creates public sentiment—chattering gossips, unscrupulous liars, congenital liars, feeble-minded people, prostitute minds, corrupting agents. To this jury any testimony is submitted, is submitted in any form, by any anonymous person, with no test of reliability, no test of credibility, and no penalty for perjury. If I lie in a lawsuit involving the fate of my neighbor's cow, I can go to jail. But if I lie to a million readers in a matter involving war and peace, I can lie my head off, and, if I choose the right series of lies, be entirely irresponsible. Nobody will punish me if I lie about Japan, for example. I can announce that every Japanese valet is a reservist, and every Japanese art store a mobilization center. I am immune. And if there should be hostilities with Japan, the more I lied the more popular I should be. If I asserted that the Japanese secretly drank the blood of children, that Japanese women were unchaste, that the Japanese were really not a branch of the human race after all, I guarantee that most of the newspapers would print it eagerly, and that I could get a hearing in churches all over the country. And all this for the simple reason that the public, when it is dependent on testimony and protected by no rules of evidence, can act only on the excitement of its pugnacities and its hopes.

The mechanism of the news-supply has developed without plan, and there is no one point in it at which one can fix the responsibility for truth. The fact is that the subdivision of labor is now accompanied by the subdivision of the news-organization. At one end of it is the eye-witness, at the other, the reader. Between the two is a vast, expensive transmitting and editing apparatus. This machine works marvelously well at times, particularly in the rapidity with which it can report the score of a game or a transatlantic flight, or the death of a monarch, or the result of an election. But where the issue is complex, as for example in the matter of the success of a policy, or the social conditions among a foreign people,—that is to say, where the

real answer is neither yes or no, but subtle, and a matter of balanced evidence,—the subdivision of the labor involved in the report causes no end of derangement, misunderstanding, and even misrepresentation.

Thus the number of eye-witnesses capable of honest statement is inadequate and accidental. Yet the reporter making up his news is dependent upon the eye-witnesses. They may be actors in the event. Then they can hardly be expected to have perspective. Who, for example, if he put aside his own likes and dislikes would trust a Bolshevik's account of what exists in Soviet Russia or an exiled Russian prince's story of what exists in Siberia? Sitting just across the frontier, say in Stockholm, how is a reporter to write dependable news when his witnesses consist of *emigrés* or Bolshevist agents?

At the Peace Conference, news was given out by the agents of the conferees and the rest leaked through those who were clamoring at the doors of the Conference. Now the reporter, if he is to earn his living, must nurse his personal contacts with the eye-witnesses and privileged informants. If he is openly hostile to those in authority, he will cease to be a reporter unless there is an opposition party in the inner circle who can feed him news. Failing that, he will know precious little of what is going on.

Most people seem to believe that, when they meet a war correspondent or a special writer from the Peace Conference, they have seen a man who has seen the things he wrote about. Far from it. Nobody, for example, saw this war. Neither the men in the trenches nor the commanding, general. The men saw their trenches, their billets, sometimes they saw an enemy trench, but nobody, unless it be the aviators, saw a battle. What the correspondents saw, occasionally, was the terrain over which a battle had been fought; but what they reported day by day was what they were told at press headquarters, and of that only what they were allowed to tell.

At the Peace Conference the reporters were allowed to meet periodically the four least important members of the Commission, men who themselves had considerable difficulty in keeping track of things, as any reporter who was present will testify. This was supplemented by spasmodic personal interviews with the commissioners, their secretaries, their secretaries' secretaries, other newspaper men, and confidential representatives of the President, who stood between him and the impertinences of curiosity. This and the French press, than which there is nothing more censored and inspired, a local English trade-journal of the expatriates, the gossip of the Crillon lobby, the Majestic, and the other official hotels, constituted the source of the news upon which American editors and the American people have had to base one of the most difficult judgments of their history.

I should perhaps add that there were a few correspondents occupying privileged positions with foreign governments. They wore ribbons in their button-holes to prove it. They were in many ways the most useful correspondents because they always revealed to the trained reader just what it was that their governments wished America to believe.

The news accumulated by the reporter from his witnesses has to be selected, if for no other reason than that the cable facilities are limited. At the cable office several varieties of censorship intervene. The legal censorship in Europe is political as well as military, and both words are elastic. It has been applied, not only to the substance of the news, but to the mode of presentation, and even to the character of the type and the position on the page. But the real censorship on the wires is the cost of transmission. This in itself is enough to limit any expensive competition or any significant independence. The big Continental news agencies are subsidized. Censorship operates also through congestion and the resultant need of a system of priority. Congestion makes possible good and bad service, and undesirable messages are not infrequently served badly.

When the report does reach the editor, another series of interventions occurs. The editor is a man who may know all about something, but he can hardly be expected to know all about everything. Yet he has to decide the question which is of more importance than any other in the formation of opinions, the question where attention is to be directed. In a newspaper the heads are the foci of attention, the odd corners the fringe; and whether one aspect of the news or another appears in the center or at the periphery makes all the difference in the world. The news of the day as it reaches the newspaper office is an incredible medley of fact, propaganda, rumor, suspicion, clues, hopes, and fears, and the task of selecting and ordering that news is one of the truly sacred and priestly offices in a democracy. For the newspaper is in all literalness the bible of democracy, the book out of which a people determines its conduct. It is the only serious book most people read. It is the only book they read every day. Now the power to determine each day what shall seem important and what shall be neglected is a power unlike any that has been exercised since the Pope lost his hold on the secular mind.

The ordering is not done by one man, but by a host of men, who are on the whole curiously unanimous in their selection and in their emphasis. Once you know the party and social affiliations of a newspaper, you can predict with considerable certainty the perspective in which the news will be displayed. This perspective is by no means altogether deliberate. Though the editor is ever so much more sophisticated than all but a minority of his readers, his own sense of relative

importance is determined by rather standardized constellations of ideas. He very soon comes to believe that his habitual emphasis is the only possible one.

Why the editor is possessed by a particular set of ideas is a difficult question in social psychology, of which no adequate analysis has been made. But we shall not be far wrong if we say that he deals with the news in reference to the prevailing *mores* of his social group. These *mores* are of course in a large measure the product of what previous newspapers have said; and experience shows that, in order to break out of this circle, it has been necessary at various times to create new forms of journalism, such as the national monthly, the critical weekly, the circular, the paid advertisements of ideas, in order to change the emphasis which had become obsolete and habit-ridden.

Into this extremely refractory, and I think increasingly disserviceable mechanism, there has been thrown, especially since the outbreak of war, another monkey-wrench—propaganda. The word, of course, covers a multitude of sins and a few virtues. The virtues can be easily separated out, and given another name, either advertisement or advocacy. Thus, if the National Council of Belgravia wishes to publish a magazine out of its own funds, under its own imprint, advocating the annexation of Thrums, no one will object. But if, in support of that advocacy, it gives to the press stories that are lies about the atrocities committed in Thrums; or, worse still, if those stories seem to come from Geneva, or Amsterdam, not from the press-service of the National Council of Belgravia, then Belgravia is conducting propaganda. If, after arousing a certain amount of interest in itself, Belgravia then invites a carefully selected correspondent, or perhaps a labor leader, to its capital, puts him up at the best hotel, rides him around in limousines, fawns on him at banquets, lunches with him very confidentially, and then puts him through a conducted tour so that he shall see just what will create the desired impression, then again Belgravia is conducting propaganda. Or if Belgravia happens to possess the greatest trombone-player in the world, and if she sends him over to charm the wives of influential husbands, Belgravia is, in a less objectionable way, perhaps, committing propaganda, and making fools of the husbands.

Now, the plain fact is that out of the troubled areas of the world the public receives practically nothing that is not propaganda. Lenin and his enemies control all the news there is of Russia, and no court of law would accept any of the testimony as valid in a suit to determine the possession of a donkey. I am writing many months after the Armistice. The Senate is at this moment engaged in debating the question whether it will guarantee the frontiers of Poland; but what we learn of Poland we learn from the Polish Government and the

Jewish Committee. Judgment on the vexed issues of Europe is simply out of the question for the average American; and the more cocksure he is, the more certainly is he the victim of some propaganda.

These instances are drawn from foreign affairs, but the difficulty at home, although less flagrant, is nevertheless real. Theodore Roosevelt, and Leonard Wood after him, have told us to think nationally. It is not easy. It is easy to parrot what those people say who live in a few big cities and who have constituted themselves the only true and authentic voice of America. But beyond that it is difficult. I live in New York and I have not the vaguest idea what Brooklyn is interested in. It is possible, with effort, much more effort than most people can afford to give, for me to know what a few organized bodies like the Non-Partisan League, the National Security League, the American Federation of Labor, and the Republican National Committee are up to; but what the unorganized workers, and the unorganized farmers, the shopkeepers, the local bankers and boards of trade are thinking and feeling, no one has any means of knowing, except perhaps in a vague way at election time. To think nationally means, at least, to take into account the major interests and needs and desires of this continental population; and for that each man would need a staff of secretaries, traveling agents, and a very expensive press-clipping bureau.

We do not think nationally because the facts that count are not systematically reported and presented in a form we can digest. Our most abysmal ignorance occurs where we deal with the immigrant. If we read his press at all, it is to discover "Bolshevism" in it and to blacken all immigrants with suspicion. For his culture and his aspirations, for his high gifts of hope and variety, we have neither eyes nor ears. The immigrant colonies are like holes in the road which we never notice until we trip over them. Then, because we have no current information and no background of facts, we are, of course, the undiscriminating objects of any agitator who chooses to rant against "foreigners."

Now, men who have lost their grip upon the relevant facts of their environment are the inevitable victims of agitation and propaganda. The quack, the charlatan, the jingo, and the terrorist, can flourish only where the audience is deprived of independent access to information. But where all news comes at second-hand, where all the testimony is uncertain, men cease to respond to truths, and respond simply to opinions. The environment in which they act is not the realities themselves, but the pseudo-environment of reports, rumors, and guesses. The whole reference of thought comes to be what somebody asserts, not what actually is. Men ask, not whether such and such a thing occurred in Russia, but whether Mr. Raymond Robins

is at heart more friendly to the Bolsheviki than Mr. Jerome Landfield. And so, since they are deprived of any trustworthy means of knowing what is really going on, since everything is on the plane of assertion and propaganda, they believe whatever fits most comfortably with their prepossessions.

That this breakdown of the means of public knowledge should occur at a time of immense change is a compounding of the difficulty. From bewilderment to panic is a short step, as everyone knows who has watched a crowd when danger threatens. At the present time a nation easily acts like a crowd. Under the influence of headlines and panicky print, the contagion of unreason can easily spread through a settled community. For when the comparatively recent and unstable nervous organization which makes us capable of responding to reality as it is, and not as we should wish it, is baffled over a continuing period of time, the more primitive but much stronger instincts are let loose.

War and Revolution, both of them founded on censorship and propaganda, are the supreme destroyers of realistic thinking, because the excess of danger and the fearful overstimulation of passion unsettle disciplined behavior. Both breed fanatics of all kinds, men who, in the words of Mr. Santayana, have redoubled their effort when they have forgotten their aim. The effort itself has become the aim. Men live in their effort, and for a time find great exaltation. They seek stimulation of their effort rather than direction of it. That is why both in war and revolution there seems to operate a kind of Gresham's Law of the emotions, in which leadership passes by a swift degradation from a Mirabeau to a Robespierre; and in war, from a high-minded statesmanship to the depths of virulent, hating jingoism.

The cardinal fact always is the loss of contact with objective information. Public as well as private reason depends upon it. Not what somebody says, not what somebody wishes were true, but what is so beyond all our opining, constitutes the touchstone of our sanity. And a society which lives at second-hand will commit incredible follies and countenance inconceivable brutalities if that contact is intermittent and untrustworthy. Demagoguery is a parasite that flourishes where discrimination fails, and only those who are at grips with things themselves are impervious to it. For, in the last analysis, the demagogue, whether of the Right or the Left, is, consciously or unconsciously an undetected liar.

Many students of politics have concluded that, because public opinion was unstable, the remedy lay in making government as independent of it as possible. The theorists of representative government have argued persistently from this premise against the believers in

direct legislation. But it appears now that, while they have been making their case against direct legislation, rather successfully it seems to me, they have failed sufficiently to notice the increasing malady of representative government.

Parliamentary action is becoming notoriously ineffective. In America certainly the concentration of power in the Executive is out of all proportion either to the intentions of the Fathers or to the orthodox theory of representative government. The cause is fairly clear. Congress is an assemblage of men selected for local reasons from districts. It brings to Washington a more or less accurate sense of the superficial desires of its constituency. In Washington it is supposed to think nationally and internationally. But for that task its equipment and its sources of information are hardly better than that of any other reader of the newspaper. Except for its spasmodic investigating committees, Congress has no particular way of informing itself. But the Executive has. The Executive is an elaborate hierarchy reaching to every part of the nation and to all parts of the world. It has an independent machinery, fallible and not too truthworthy, of course, but nevertheless a machinery of intelligence. It can be informed and it can act, whereas Congress is not informed and cannot act.

Now the popular theory of representative government is that the representatives have the information and therefore create the policy which the executive administers. The more subtle theory is that the executive initiates the policy which the legislature corrects in accordance with popular wisdom. But when the legislature is haphazardly informed, this amounts to very little, and the people themselves prefer to trust the executive which knows, rather than the Congress which is vainly trying to know. The result has been the development of a kind of government which has been harshly described as plébiscite autocracy, or government by newspapers. Decisions in the modern state tend to be made by the interaction, not of Congress and the executive, but of public opinion and the executive.

Public opinion for this purpose finds itself collected about special groups which act as extra-legal organs of government. There is a labor nucleus, a farmers' nucleus, a prohibition nucleus, a National Security League nucleus, and so on. These groups conduct a continual electioneering campaign upon the unformed, exploitable mass of public opinion. Being special groups, they have special sources of information, and what they lack in the way of information is often manufactured. These conflicting pressures beat upon the executive departments and upon Congress, and formulate the conduct of the government. The government itself acts in reference to these groups far more than in reference to the district congressmen. So politics as

it is now played consists in coercing and seducing the representative by the threat and the appeal of these unofficial groups. Sometimes they are the allies, sometimes the enemies, of the party in power, but more and more they are the energy of public affairs. Government tends to operate by the impact of controlled opinion upon administration. This shift in the locus of sovereignty has placed a premium upon the manufacture of what is usually called consent. No wonder that the most powerful newspaper proprietor in the English-speaking world declined a mere government post.

No wonder, too, that the protection of the sources of its opinion is the basic problem of democracy. Everything else depends upon it. Without protection against propaganda, without standards of evidence, without criteria of emphasis, the living substance of all popular decision is exposed to every prejudice and to infinite exploitation. That is why I have argued that the older doctrine of liberty was misleading. It did not assume a public opinion that governs. Essentially it demanded toleration of opinions that were, as Milton said, indifferent. It can guide us little in a world where opinion is sensitive and decisive.

The axis of the controversy needs to be shifted. The attempt to draw fine distinctions between "liberty" and "license" is no doubt part of the day's work, but it is fundamentally a negative part. It consists in trying to make opinion responsible to prevailing social standards, whereas the really important thing is to try and make opinion increasingly responsible to the facts. There can be no liberty for a community which lacks the information by which to detect lies. Trite as the conclusion may at first seem, it has, I believe, immense practical consequences, and may perhaps offer an escape from the logomachy into which the contests of liberty so easily degenerate.

It may be bad to suppress a particular opinion, but the really deadly thing is to suppress the news. In time of great insecurity, certain opinions acting on unstable minds may cause infinite disaster. Knowing that such opinions necessarily originate in slender evidence, that they are propelled more by prejudice from the rear than by reference to realities, it seems to me that to build the case for liberty upon the dogma of their unlimited prerogatives is to build it upon the poorest foundation. For, even though we grant that the world is best served by the liberty of all opinion, the plain fact is that men are too busy and too much concerned to fight more than spasmodically for such liberty. When freedom of opinion is revealed as freedom of error, illusion, and misinterpretation, it is virtually impossible to stir up much interest in its behalf. It is the thinnest of all abstractions and an over-refinement of mere intellectualism. But people, wide circles of people, are aroused when their curiosity is

baulked. The desire to know, the dislike of being deceived and made game of, is a really powerful motive, and it is that motive that can best be enlisted in the cause of freedom.

What, for example, was the one most general criticism of the work of the Peace Conference? It was that the covenants were not openly arrived at. This fact stirred Republican Senators, British Labor, the whole gamut of parties from the Right to the Left. And in the last analysis lack of information about the Conference *was* the origin of its difficulties. Because of the secrecy endless suspicion was aroused; because of it the world seemed to be presented with a series of accomplished facts which it could not reject and did not wish altogether to accept. It was lack of information which kept public opinion from affecting the negotiations at the time when intervention would have counted most and cost least. Publicity occurred when the covenants were arrived at, with all the emphasis on the *at*. This is what the Senate objected to, and this is what alienated much more liberal opinion than the Senate represents.

In a passage quoted previously in this essay, Milton said that differences of opinion, "which though they may be many, yet need not interrupt the unity of spirit, if we could but find among us the bond of peace." There is but one kind of unity possible in a world as diverse as ours. It is unity of method, rather than of aim; the unity of the disciplined experiment. There is but one bond of peace that is both permanent and enriching: the increasing knowledge of the world in which experiment occurs. With a common intellectual method and a common area of valid fact, differences may become a form of cooperation and cease to be an irreconcilable antagonism.

That, I think, constitutes the meaning of freedom for us. We cannot successfully define liberty, or accomplish it, by a series of permissions and prohibitions. For that is to ignore the content of opinion in favor of its form. Above all, it is an attempt to define liberty of opinion in terms of opinion. It is a circular and sterile logic. A useful definition of liberty is obtainable only by seeking the principle of liberty in the main business of human life, that is to say, in the process by which men educate their response and learn to control their environment. In this view liberty is the name we give to measures by which we protect and increase the veracity of the information upon which we act.