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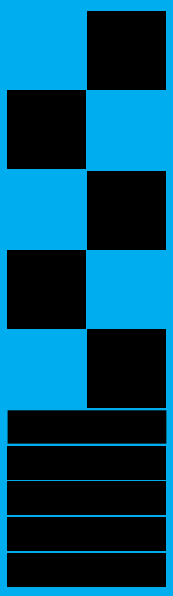
Liberty and the News

Walter Lippmann



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Walter Lippmann

LIBERTY AND THE NEWS

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The debates about liberty have hitherto all been attempts to determine just when in the series from Right to Left the censorship should intervene. In the preceding paper I ventured to ask whether these attempts do not turn on a misconception of the problem. The conclusion reached was that, in dealing with liberty of opinion, we were dealing with a subsidiary phase of the whole matter; that, so long as we were content to argue about the privileges and immunities of opinion, we were missing the point and trying to make bricks without straw. We should never succeed even in fixing a standard of tolerance for opinions, if we concentrated all our attention on the opinions. For they are derived, not necessarily by reason, to be sure, but somehow, from the stream of news that reaches the public, and the protection of that stream is the critical interest in a modern state. In going behind opinion to the information which it exploits, and in making the validity of the news our ideal, we shall be fighting the battle where it is really being fought. We shall be protecting for the public interest that which all the special interests in the world are most anxious to corrupt.

As the sources of the news are protected, as the information they furnish becomes accessible and usable, as our capacity to read that information is educated, the old problem of tolerance will wear a new aspect. Many questions which seem hopelessly insoluble now will cease to seem important enough to be worth solving. Thus the advocates of a larger freedom always argue that true opinions will prevail over error; their opponents always claim that you can fool most of the people most of the time. Both statements are true, but both are half-truths. True opinions can prevail only if the facts to which they refer are known; if they are not known, false ideas are just as effective as true ones, if not a little more effective.

The sensible procedure in matters affecting the liberty of opinion would be to ensure as impartial an investigation of the facts as is humanly possible. But it is just this investigation that is denied us. It is denied us, because we are dependent upon the testimony

of anonymous and untrained and prejudiced witnesses; because the complexity of the relevant facts is beyond the scope of our hurried understanding; and finally, because the process we call education fails so lamentably to educate the sense of evidence or the power of penetrating to the controlling center of a situation. The task of liberty, therefore, falls roughly under three heads, protection of the sources of the news, organization of the news so as to make it comprehensible, and education of human response.

We need, first, to know what can be done with the existing news-structure, in order to correct its grosser evils. How far is it useful to go in fixing personal responsibility for the truthfulness of news? Much further, I am inclined to think, than we have ever gone. We ought to know the names of the whole staff of every periodical. While it is not necessary, or even desirable, that each article should be signed, each article should be documented, and false documentation should be illegal. An item of news should always state whether it is received from one of the great news-agencies, or from a reporter, or from a press bureau. Particular emphasis should be put on marking news supplied by press bureaus, whether they are labeled "Geneva," or "Stockholm," or "El Paso."

One wonders next whether anything can be devised to meet that great evil of the press, the lie which, once under way, can never be tracked down. The more scrupulous papers will, of course, print a retraction when they have unintentionally injured someone; but the retraction rarely compensates the victim. The law of libel is a clumsy and expensive instrument, and rather useless to private individuals or weak organizations because of the gentlemen's agreement which obtains in the newspaper world. After all, the remedy for libel is not money damages, but an undoing of the injury. Would it be possible then to establish courts of honor in which publishers should be compelled to meet their accusers and, if found guilty of misrepresentation, ordered to publish the correction in the particular form and with the prominence specified by the finding of the court? I do not know. Such courts might prove to be a great nuisance, consuming time and energy and attention, and offering too free a field for individuals with a persecution mania.

Perhaps a procedure could be devised which would eliminate most of these inconveniences. Certainly it would be a great gain if the accountability of publishers could be increased. They exercise more power over the individual than is healthy, as everybody knows who has watched the yellow press snooping at keyholes and invading the privacy of helpless men and women. Even more important than this, is the utterly reckless power of the press in dealing with news vitally affecting the friendship of peoples. In a Court of Honor,

possible perhaps only in Utopia, voluntary associations working for decent relations with other peoples might hale the jingo and the subtle propagandist before a tribunal, to prove the reasonable truth of his assertion or endure the humiliation of publishing prominently a finding against his character.

This whole subject is immensely difficult, and full of traps. It would be well worth an intensive investigation by a group of publishers, lawyers, and students of public affairs. Because in some form or other the next generation will attempt to bring the publishing business under greater social control. There is everywhere an increasingly angry disillusionment about the press, a growing sense of being baffled and misled; and wise publishers will not pooh-pooh these omens. They might well note the history of prohibition, where a failure to work out a programme of temperance brought about an undiscriminating taboo. The regulation of the publishing business is a subtle and elusive matter, and only by an early and sympathetic effort to deal with great evils can the more sensible minds retain their control. If publishers and authors themselves do not face the facts and attempt to deal with them, some day Congress, in a fit of temper, egged on by an outraged public opinion, will operate on the press with an ax. For somehow the community must find a way of making the men who publish news accept responsibility for an honest effort not to misrepresent the facts.

But the phrase "honest effort" does not take us very far. The problem here is not different from that which we begin dimly to apprehend in the field of government and business administration. The untrained amateur may mean well, but he knows not how to do well. Why should he? What are the qualifications for being a surgeon? A certain minimum of special training. What are the qualifications for operating daily on the brain and heart of a nation? None. Go some time and listen to the average run of questions asked in interviews with Cabinet officers or anywhere else.

I remember one reporter who was detailed to the Peace Conference by a leading news-agency. He came around every day for "news." It was a time when Central Europe seemed to be disintegrating, and great doubt existed as to whether governments would be found with which to sign a peace. But all that this "reporter" wanted to know was whether the German fleet, then safely interned at Scapa Flow, was going to be sunk in the North Sea. He insisted every day on knowing that. For him it was the German fleet or nothing. Finally, he could endure it no longer. So he anticipated Admiral Reuther and announced, in a dispatch to his home papers, that the fleet would be sunk. And when I say that a million American adults learned all that they ever learned about the Peace Conference through this reporter, I am stating a very moderate figure.

He suggests the delicate question raised by the schools of journalism: how far can we go in turning newspaper enterprise from a haphazard trade into a disciplined profession? Quite far, I imagine, for it is altogether unthinkable that a society like ours should remain forever dependent upon untrained accidental witnesses. It is no answer to say that there have been in the past, and that there are now, first-rate correspondents. Of course there are. Men like Brailsford, Oulahan, Gibbs, Lawrence, Swope, Strunsky, Draper, Hard, Dillon, Lowry, Levine, Ackerman, Ray Stannard Baker, Frank Cobb, and William Allen White, know their way about in this world. But they are eminences on a rather flat plateau. The run of the news is handled by men of much smaller caliber. It is handled by such men because reporting is not a dignified profession for which men will invest the time and cost of an education, but an underpaid, insecure, anonymous form of drudgery, conducted on catch-as-catch-can principles. Merely to talk about the reporter in terms of his real importance to civilization will make newspaper men laugh. Yet reporting is a post of peculiar honor. Observation must precede every other activity, and the public observer (that is, the reporter) is a man of critical value. No amount of money or effort spent in fitting the right men for this work could possibly be wasted, for the health of society depends upon the quality of the information it receives.

Do our schools of journalism, the few we have, make this kind of training their object, or are they trade-schools designed to fit men for higher salaries in the existing structure? I do not presume to answer the question, nor is the answer of great moment when we remember how small a part these schools now play in actual journalism. But it is important to know whether it would be worth while to endow large numbers of schools on the model of those now existing, and make their diplomas a necessary condition for the practice of reporting. It is worth considering. Against the idea lies the fact that it is difficult to decide just what reporting is—where in the whole mass of printed matter it begins and ends. No one would wish to set up a closed guild of reporters and thus exclude invaluable casual reporting and writing. If there is anything in the idea at all, it would apply only to the routine service of the news through large organizations.

Personally I should distrust too much ingenuity of this kind, on the ground that, while it might correct certain evils, the general tendency would be to turn the control of the news over to unenterprising stereotyped minds soaked in the traditions of a journalism always ten years out of date. The better course is to avoid the deceptive short cuts, and make up our minds to send out into reporting a generation of men who will by sheer superiority, drive the incompetents out of business. That means two things. It means a public recognition of

the dignity of such a career, so that it will cease to be the refuge of the vaguely talented. With this increase of prestige must go a professional training in journalism in which the ideal of objective testimony is cardinal. The cynicism of the trade needs to be abandoned, for the true patterns of the journalistic apprentice are not the slick persons who scoop the news, but the patient and fearless men of science who have labored to see what the world really is. It does not matter that the news is not susceptible of mathematical statement. In fact, just because news is complex and slippery, good reporting requires the exercise of the highest of the scientific virtues. They are the habits of ascribing no more credibility to a statement than it warrants, a nice sense of the probabilities, and a keen understanding of the quantitative importance of particular facts. You can judge the general reliability of any observer most easily by the estimate he puts upon the reliability of his own report. If you have no facts of your own with which to check him, the best rough measurement is to wait and see whether he is aware of any limitations in himself; whether he knows that he saw only part of the event he describes; and whether he has any background of knowledge against which he can set what he thinks he has seen.

This kind of sophistication is, of course, necessary for the merest pretense to any education. But for different professions it needs to be specialized in particular ways. A sound legal training is pervaded by it, but the skepticism is pointed to the type of case with which the lawyer deals. The reporter's work is not carried on under the same conditions, and therefore requires a different specialization. How he is to acquire it is, of course, a pedagogical problem requiring an inductive study of the types of witness and the sources of information with whom the reporter is in contact.

Some time in the future, when men have thoroughly grasped the role of public opinion in society, scholars will not hesitate to write treatises on evidence for the use of news-gathering services. No such treatise exists to-day, because political science has suffered from that curious prejudice of the scholar which consists in regarding an irrational phenomenon as not quite worthy of serious study.

Closely akin to an education in the tests of credibility is rigorous discipline in the use of words. It is almost impossible to overestimate the confusion in daily life caused by sheer inability to use language with intention. We talk scornfully of "mere words." Yet through words the whole vast process of human communication takes place. The sights and sounds and meanings of nearly all that we deal with as "politics," we learn, not by our own experience, but through the words of others. If those words are meaningless lumps charged with emotion, instead of the messengers of fact, all sense of

evidence breaks down. Just so long as big words like Bolshevism, Americanism, patriotism, pro-Germanism, are used by reporters to cover anything and anybody that the biggest fool at large wishes to include, just so long shall we be seeking our course through a fog so dense that we cannot tell whether we fly upside-down or right-side-up. It is a measure of our education as a people that so many of us are perfectly content to live our political lives in this fraudulent environment of unanalyzed words. For the reporter, abracadabra is fatal. So long as he deals in it, he is gullibility itself, seeing nothing of the world, and living, as it were, in a hall of crazy mirrors.

Only the discipline of a modernized logic can open the door to reality. An overwhelming part of the dispute about "freedom of opinion" turns on words which mean different things to the censor and the agitator. So long as the meanings of the words are not dissociated, the dispute will remain a circular wrangle. Education that shall make men masters of their vocabulary is one of the central interests of liberty. For such an education alone can transform the dispute into debate from similar premises.

A sense of evidence and a power to define words must for the modern reporter be accompanied by a working knowledge of the main stratifications and currents of interest. Unless he knows that "news" of society almost always starts from a special group, he is doomed to report the surface of events. He will report the ripples of a passing steamer, and forget the tides and the currents and the ground-swell. He will report what Kolchak or Lenin says, and see what they do only when it confirms what he thinks they said. He will deal with the flicker of events and not with their motive. There are ways of reading that flicker so as to discern the motive, but they have not been formulated in the light of recent knowledge. Here is big work for the student of politics. The good reporter reads events with an intuition trained by wide personal experience. The poor reporter cannot read them, because he is not even aware that there is anything in particular to read.

And then the reporter needs a general sense of what the world is doing. Emphatically he ought not to be serving a cause, no matter how good. In his professional activity it is no business of his to care whose ox is gored. To be sure, when so much reporting is *ex parte*, and hostile to insurgent forces, the insurgents in self-defense send out *ex parte* reporters of their own. But a community cannot rest content to learn the truth about the Democrats by reading the Republican papers, and the truth about the Republicans by reading the Democratic papers. There is room, and there is need, for disinterested reporting; and if this sounds like a counsel of perfection now, it is only because the science of public opinion is still at the point

where astronomy was when theological interests proclaimed the conclusions that all research must vindicate.

While the reporter will serve no cause, he will possess a steady sense that the chief purpose of "news" is to enable mankind to live successfully toward the future. He will know that the world is a process, not by any means always onward and upward, but never quite the same. As the observer of the signs of change, his value to society depends upon the prophetic discrimination with which he selects those signs.

But the news from which he must pick and choose has long since become too complicated even for the most highly trained reporter. The work, say, of the government is really a small part of the day's news, yet even the wealthiest and most resourceful newspapers fail in their efforts to report "Washington." The high lights and the disputes and sensational incidents are noted, but no one can keep himself informed about his Congressman or about the individual departments, by reading the daily press. This failure in no way reflects on the newspapers. It results from the intricacy and unwieldiness of the subject-matter. Thus, it is easier to report Congress than it is to report the departments, because the work of Congress crystallizes crudely every so often in a roll-call. But administration, although it has become more important than legislation, is hard to follow, because its results are spread over a longer period of time, and its effects are felt in ways that no reporter can really measure.

Theoretically Congress is competent to act as the critical eye on administration. Actually, the investigations of Congress are almost always planless raids, conducted by men too busy and too little informed to do more than catch the grosser evils, or intrude upon good work that is not understood. It was a recognition of these difficulties that was the cause of two very interesting experiments in late years. One was the establishment of more or less semi-official institutes of government research; the other, the growth of specialized private agencies which attempt to give technical summaries of the work of various branches of the government. Neither experiment has created much commotion: yet together they illustrate an idea which, properly developed, will be increasingly valuable to an enlightened public opinion.

Their principle is simple. They are expert organized reporters. Having no horror of dullness, no interest in being dramatic, they can study statistics and orders and reports which are beyond the digestive powers of a newspaper man or of his readers. The lines of their growth would seem to be threefold: to make a current record, to make a running analysis of it, and on the basis of both, to suggest plans.

Record and analysis require an experimental formulation of standards by which the work of government can be tested. Such standards are not to be evolved off-hand out of anyone's consciousness. Some have already been worked out experimentally, others still need to be discovered; all need to be refined and brought into perspective by the wisdom of experience. Carried out competently, the public would gradually learn to substitute objective criteria for gossip and intuitions. One can imagine a public-health service subjected to such expert criticism. The institute of research publishes the death-rate as a whole for a period of years. It seems that for a particular season the rate is bad in certain maladies, that in others the rate of improvement is not sufficiently rapid. These facts are compared with the expenditures of the service, and with the main lines of its activity. Are the bad results due to the causes beyond the control of the service? do they indicate a lack of foresight in asking appropriations for special work? or in the absence of novel phenomena, do they point to a decline of the personnel, or in its morale? If the latter, further analysis may reveal that salaries are too low to attract men of ability, or that the head of the service by bad management has weakened the interest of his staff.

When the work of government is analyzed in some such way as this, the reporter deals with a body of knowledge that has been organized for his apprehension. In other words, he is able to report the "news," because between him and the raw material of government there has been interposed a more or less expert political intelligence. He ceases to be the ant, described by William James, whose view of a building was obtained by crawling over the cracks in the walls.

These political observatories will, I think, be found useful in all branches of government, national, state, municipal, industrial, and even in foreign affairs. They should be clearly out of reach either of the wrath or of the favor of the office-holders. They must, of course, be endowed, but the endowment should be beyond the immediate control of the legislature and of the rich patron. Their independence can be partially protected by the terms of the trust; the rest must be defended by the ability of the institute to make itself so much the master of the facts as to be impregnably based on popular confidence.

One would like to think that the universities could be brought into such a scheme. Were they in close contact with the current record and analysis, there might well be a genuine "field work" in political science for the students; and there could be no better directing idea for their more advanced researches than the formulation of the intellectual methods by which the experience of government could be brought to usable control. After all, the purpose of studying "politi-

cal science" is to be able to act more effectively in politics, the word effectively being understood in the largest and, therefore, the ideal sense. In the universities men should be able to think patiently and generously for the good of society. If they do not, surely one of the reasons is that thought terminates in doctor's theses and brown quarterlies, and not in the critical issues of politics.

On first thought, all this may seem rather a curious direction for an inquiry into the substance of liberty. Yet we have always known, as a matter of common sense, that there was an intimate connection between "liberty" and the use of liberty. Every one who has examined the subject at all has had to conclude that tolerance *per se* is an arbitrary line, and that, in practice, the determining factor is the significance of the opinion to be tolerated. This study is based on an avowal of that fact. Once it is avowed, there seems to be no way of evading the conclusion that liberty is not so much permission as it is the construction of a system of information increasingly independent of opinion. In the long run it looks as if opinion could be made at once free and enlightening only by transferring our interest from "opinion" to the objective realities from which it springs. This thought has led us to speculations on ways of protecting and organizing the stream of news as the source of all opinion that matters. Obviously these speculations do not pretend to offer a fully considered or a completed scheme. Their nature forbids it, and I should be guilty of the very opinionativeness I have condemned, did these essays claim to be anything more than tentative indications of the more important phases of the problem.

Yet I can well imagine their causing a considerable restlessness in the minds of some readers. Standards, institutes, university research, schools of journalism, they will argue, may be all right, but they are a gray business in a vivid world. They blunt the edge of life; they leave out of account the finely irresponsible opinion thrown out by the creative mind; they do not protect the indispensable novelty from philistinism and oppression. These proposals of yours, they will say, ignore the fact that such an apparatus of knowledge will in the main be controlled by the complacent and the traditional, and the execution will inevitably be illiberal.

There is force in the indictment. And yet I am convinced that we shall accomplish more by fighting for truth than by fighting for our theories. It is a better loyalty. It is a humbler one, but it is also more irresistible. Above all it is educative. For the real enemy is ignorance, from which all of us, conservative, liberal, and revolutionary, suffer. If our effort is concentrated on our desires,—be it our desire to have and to hold what is good, our desire to remake peacefully, or our desire to transform suddenly,—we shall divide hopelessly and

irretrievably. We must go back of our opinions to the neutral facts for unity and refreshment of spirit. To deny this, it seems to me, is to claim that the mass of men is impervious to education, and to deny that, is to deny the postulate of democracy, and to seek salvation in a dictatorship. There is, I am convinced, nothing but misery and confusion that way. But I am equally convinced that democracy will degenerate into this dictatorship either of the Right or of the Left, if it does not become genuinely self-governing. That means, in terms of public opinion, a resumption of that contact between beliefs and realities which we have been losing steadily since the small-town democracy was absorbed into the Great Society.

The administration of public information toward greater accuracy and more successful analysis is the highway of liberty. It is, I believe, a matter of first-rate importance that we should fix this in our minds. Having done so, we may be able to deal more effectively with the traps and the lies and the special interests which obstruct the road and drive us astray. Without a clear conception of what the means of liberty are, the struggle for free speech and free opinion easily degenerates into a mere contest of opinion.

But realization is not the last step, though it is the first. We need be under no illusion that the stream of news can be purified simply by pointing out the value of purity. The existing news-structure may be made serviceable to democracy along the general lines suggested, by the training of the journalist, and by the development of expert record and analysis. But while it may be, it will not be, simply by saying that it ought to be. Those who are now in control have too much at stake, and they control the source of reform itself.

Change will come only by the drastic competition of those whose interests are not represented in the existing news-organization. It will come only if organized labor and militant liberalism set a pace which cannot be ignored. Our sanity and, therefore, our safety depend upon this competition, upon fearless and relentless exposure conducted by self-conscious groups that are now in a minority. It is for these groups to understand that the satisfaction of advertising a pet theory is as nothing compared to the publication of the news. And having realized it, it is for them to combine their resources and their talent for the development of an authentic news-service which is invincible because it supplies what the community is begging for and cannot get.

All the gallant little sheets expressing particular programmes are at bottom vanity, and in the end, futility, so long as the reporting of daily news is left in untrained and biased hands. If we are to move ahead, we must see a great independent journalism, setting standards for commercial journalism, like those which the splendid English

coöperative societies are setting for commercial business. An enormous amount of money is dribbled away in one fashion or another on little papers, mass-meetings, and what not. If only some considerable portion of it could be set aside to establish a central international news-agency, we should make progress. We cannot fight the untruth which envelops us by parading our opinions. We can do it only by reporting the facts, and we do not deserve to win if the facts are against us.

The country is spotted with benevolent foundations of one kind or another, many of them doing nothing but pay the upkeep of fine buildings and sinecures. Organized labor spends large sums of money on politics and strikes which fail because it is impossible to secure a genuine hearing in public opinion. Could there be a pooling of money for a news-agency? Not, I imagine, if its object were to further a cause. But suppose the plan were for a news-service in which editorial matter was rigorously excluded, and the work was done by men who had already won the confidence of the public by their independence? Then, perhaps.

At any rate, our salvation lies in two things: ultimately, in the infusion of the news-structure by men with a new training and outlook; immediately, in the concentration of the independent forces against the complacency and bad service of the routineers. We shall advance when we have learned humility; when we have learned to seek the truth, to reveal it and publish it; when we care more for that than for the privilege of arguing about ideas in a fog of uncertainty.