

Politics and Information: Discussion Notes

1. Why “transparency”?

Results 1 - 100 of about 2,430,000 for [transparency democracy](#)

No democratic society worthy of the name can govern itself without transparency and information. Onthecommons.org

We must use all available technologies and methods to open up the federal government, creating a new level of transparency to change the way business is conducted in Washington and giving Americans the chance to participate in government deliberations and decision-making in ways that were not possible only a few years ago. www.barackobama.org

How is the information revolution affecting the practice and prospects of democracy around the world? Is it growing the global public's opportunities for free political expression and participation from the grassroots up, or rather is it simply reinforcing existing patterns of inequality and hierarchical power relationships? Is it strengthening the social foundations of electoral politics, such as political parties and a shared civic culture, or is it weakening them? Will it expand the ability of authoritarian regimes to utilize propaganda and to monitor their citizens' behavior, or will it help pro-democracy activists to progressively chip away at their grip on power? Wm. F. Drake, “Democracy and the Information Revolution,” Carnegie Foundation report

2. Background of Lippmann and Dewey

Growth and heterogeneity of the public

Complexity of government

Political significance of information & literacy

[To the free library] we may hopefully look for the gradual deliverance of the people from the wiles of the rhetorician and stump orator.... As the varied intelligence which books can supply shall be more and more widely assimilated, the essential elements of every political and social question may be confidently submitted to that instructed common sense upon which the founders of our government relied. J. P. Quincy, 1876

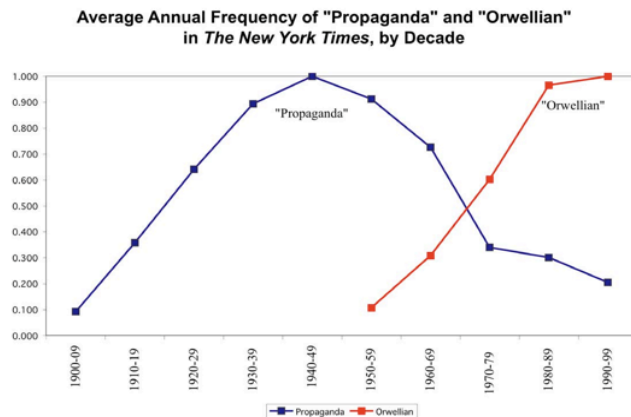
Rise of the mass media

The local face-to-face community has been invaded by forces so fast, so remote in initiation, so far-reaching in scope and so complexly indirect in operation, that they are, from the standpoint of the members of local social units, unknown.

We have the physical tools of communication as never before. The thoughts and aspirations congruous with them are not communicated, and hence are not common. Without such communication the public will remain shadowy and formless... Communication alone can create a great community. Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*

The rise of “propaganda”

Before 1914, 'propaganda' belonged only to literate vocabularies and possessed a reputable, dignified meaning... Two years later the word had come into the vocabulary of peasants and ditchdiggers and had begun to acquire its miasmatic aura. Will Irwin, *Propaganda and the News*, 1938



"If we understand the mechanism and motives of the group mind, is it not possible to control and regiment the masses according to our will without their knowing about it? The recent practice of propaganda has proved that it is possible, at least up to a certain point and within certain limits.

The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country. ...We are governed, our minds are molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of. This is a logical result of the way in which our democratic society is organized. Vast numbers of human beings must cooperate in this manner if they are to live together as a smoothly functioning society. ...In almost every act of our daily lives, whether in the sphere of politics or business, in our social conduct or our ethical thinking, we are dominated by the relatively small number of persons...who understand the mental processes and social patterns of the masses. It is they who pull the wires which control the public mind. Edward Bernays, *Propaganda*, 1928

The "Informed public"

Lipmann on Limits on information (v. noun)

Structural barriers:

artificial censorships, the limitations of social contact, the comparatively meagre time available in each day for paying attention to public affairs, the distortion arising because events have to be compressed into very short messages, the difficulty of making a small vocabulary express a complicated world, and finally a fear of facing those facts which would seem to threaten the established routine of men's lives.

Psychological barriers: the "pseudo-environment"

"[humans] are not equipped to deal with so much subtlety, so much variety, so many permutations and combinations. And although we have to act in that environment,

we have to reconstruct it on a simpler model before we can manage with it.
Lippmann, *Public Opinion*

The need in the Great Society not only for publicity but for uninterrupted publicity is indisputable. But we shall misunderstand the need seriously if we imagine that the purpose of the publication can possibly be the informing of every voter. We live at the mere beginnings of public accounting. Yet the facts far exceed our curiosity. ... A few executives here and there . . . read them. The rest of us ignore them for the good and sufficient reason that we have other things to do. Lippmann, *The Phantom Public*

The “pictures in our heads”

[On Aristotle on slavery] This is the perfect stereotype. Its hallmark is that it precedes the use of reason; is a form of perception, imposes a certain character on the data of our senses before the data reach the intelligence. The stereotype is like the lavender window-panes on Beacon Street, like the door-keeper at a costume ball who judges whether the guest has an appropriate masquerade. There is nothing so obdurate to education or to criticism as the stereotype. *Pub Opinion*

Forming “Public Opinion” -- on “the group mind”

The role of symbols

How in the language of democratic theory, do great numbers of people feeling each so privately about so abstract a picture, develop any common will? ...How are those things known as the Will of the People, or the National Purpose, or Public Opinion crystallized out of such fleeting and casual imagery? But how is it that a vague idea so often has the power to unite deeply felt opinions? ... The fading pictures are displaced by other pictures, and then by names or symbols. But the emotion goes on, capable now of being aroused by the substituted images and names... if a man is trying to compare two complicated situations, he soon finds exhausting the attempt to hold both fully in mind in all their detail. He employs a shorthand of names and signs and samples.... But if he forgets that he has substituted and simplified, he soon lapses into verbalism, and begins to talk about names regardless of objects. And then he has no way of knowing when the name divorced from its first thing is carrying on a misalliance with some other thing.
Public Opinion

The making of one general will out of a multitude of general wishes is not an Hegelian mystery... but an art well known to leaders, politicians, and steering committees. It consists essentially in the use of symbols which detach emotions after they have been detached from their ideas. *Phantom Public*

The question of a proper fare on a municipal subway is symbolized as an issue between the People and the Interests, and then the People is inserted in the symbol American, so that finally in the heat of a campaign, an eight cent fare becomes un-American. The Revolutionary fathers died to prevent it. Lincoln suffered that it might not come to pass, resistance to it was implied in the death of those who sleep in France. *Phantom Public*

When political parties or newspapers declare for Americanism Progressivism, Law and Order, Justice, Humanity, they hope to amalgamate the emotion of conflicting factions which would surely divide, if, instead of these symbols, they were invited to discuss a specific program. For when a coalition around the symbol has been effected, feeling flows toward conformity under the symbol rather than toward critical scrutiny of the measures. PO

[symbols] do not stand for specific ideas, but for a sort of truce or junction between ideas. PO

The role of the public:

Essentially plebicitary: can say “yes” or “no”

Decisions must be left to experts, chosen by other experts...

Theoretically we ought to choose the most expert on each subject. But the choice of the expert, though a good deal easier than the choice of truth, is still too difficult and often impracticable.

One mind, or a few can pursue a train of thought, but a group trying to think in concert can as a group do little more than assent or dissent. Distance alone lends enchantment to the view that masses of human beings ever cooperate in any complex affair without a central machine managed by a very few people.

Modern Symbolic Politics

Varities of “symbols”:

the flag, \$600 ashtrays, personal pecadillos, Terry Schiavo, bad bowling, the “War on Christmas,” the Ten Commandments monument, etc.

“Symbol words”:

values, tradition, freedom (economic, of contract, of choice, etc.) ownership, patriotism, government, choice, color- blind, preference...

cf Richard Rorty on our “final vocabulary”: “All human beings carry about a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives. These are the words in which we formulate praise of our friends and contempt for our enemies, our long-term projects, our deepest self-doubts and our highest hopes.

Reclaiming symbols: “In thinking about symbols it is tempting to treat them as if they possessed independent energy.” Lippmann

Symbols as “information shortcuts”

Political symbols as “just another form of information cost-saving.” (Popkin)

Shortcuts in daily life: brands, endorsements, personal appearance (cf. Nelson Algren’s three rules for a happy life)

Ideologies as a shortcut, “verbal image of the good society.”

If voters.... Were fully informed about government and could assess how their own benefits would be affected by a party’s platform... they would pay no attention to ideology... Ideology is not a mark of sophistication... but of uncertainty. Popkin

Demography as a shortcut (Identity politics)

Inferring competence & moral values

E.g., Eagleton choice, Dukakis in tank; private moral choices as shortcuts

Blocking Information

Downs: “Party loyalties operate to reduce the effects of the media”

“Selective exposure.” The role of “media bias”

Dewey's Response to Lippmann

Democracy as both means and end.

Democracy is not an alternative to the other principles of associative life. It is the idea of community life itself.

The transition from family and dynastic government supported by the loyalties of tradition to popular was the outcome primarily of technological discoveries and inventions working a change in the customs by which men had been bound together.

We have but touched lightly and in passing upon the conditions which must be fulfilled if the Great Society is to become a Great Community; a society in which the ever-expanding and intricately ramifying consequences of associated activities shall be known in the full sense of that word, so that an organized, articulate Public comes into being.

Vision and hearing

Vision is a spectator; hearing is a participator. Publication is partial and the public which results is partially informed and formed until the meanings it purveys pass from mouth to mouth. Dewey, *The Public & its Problems*

Signs and symbols, language, are the means of communication by which a fraternally shared experience is ushered in and sustained. But conversation has a vital import lacking in the fixed and frozen words of written speech.... That and only that gives reality to public opinion.

The role of New Media