

2.1. THE DEMOCRATIC DEBILITY

2.1.1. The Problem of the Public – Walter Lippmann (1889-1974)

"The world that we have to deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind. It has to be explored, reported, and imagined. Man is no Aristotelian god contemplating all existence at one glance. He is a creature of an evolution who can just about span a sufficient portion of reality to manage his survival, and snatch what on the scale of time are but a few moments of insight and happiness. Yet this same creature has invented ways of seeing what no naked eye could see ... He is learning to see with his mind vast portions of the world that he could never see, touch, smell, hear, or remember. Gradually he makes for himself a trustworthy picture inside his head of the world beyond his reach.

"Those features of the world outside which have to do with the behaviour of other human beings, in so far as that behaviour crosses ours, is dependent on us, or is interesting to us, we call roughly public affairs. The pictures inside the heads of these human beings, the pictures of themselves, of others, of their needs, purposes, and relationship, are their public opinions. Those pictures which are acted upon by groups of people, or by individuals acting in the name of groups, are Public Opinion with capital letters."

(Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* [1922], p, 29.)

"I argue that representative government, either in what is ordinarily called politics, or in industry, cannot be worked successfully, no matter what the basis of election, unless there is an independent, expert organization for making the unseen facts intelligible to those who have to make decisions ... [T]he serious acceptance of the principle that personal representation must be supplemented by representation of the unseen facts would alone permit a satisfactory decentralization, and allow us to escape from the intolerable and unworkable fiction that each of us must acquire a competent opinion about all public affairs."

(Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* [1922], p, 31.)

"It is possible and necessary for journalists to bring home to people the uncertain character of the truth on which their opinions are founded, and by criticism and agitation to prod social science into making more usable formulations of social facts, and to prod statesmen into establishing more visible institutions. The press, in other words, can fight for the extension of reportable truth. But as social truth is organized to-day, the press is not constituted to furnish from one edition to the next the amount of knowledge which the democratic theory of public opinion demands ...

"If the newspapers ... are to be charged with the duty of translating the whole public life of mankind, so that every adult can arrive at an opinion on every moot topic, they fail, they are bound to fail, they are bound to continue to fail. It is not possible to assume that a world, carried on by division of labor and distribution of authority, can be governed by universal opinions in the whole population ... Acting upon everybody for thirty minutes in twenty-four hours, the press is asked to create a mystical force called Public Opinion that will take up the slack in public institutions. The press has often mistakenly pretended that it could do just that. It has at great moral cost to itself, encourage democracy, still bound to its original premises, to expect newspapers to supply spontaneously for every organ of government, for every social problem, the machinery of information which these do not normally supply themselves. Institutions, having failed to furnish themselves with instruments of knowledge, have become a bundle of 'problems', which the population as a whole, reading the press as a whole, is supposed to solve ...

"[T]he quality of the news about modern society is an index of its social organization. The better the institutions, the more all interests concerned are formally represented, the more issues are disentangled, the objective criteria are introduced, the more perfectly an affair can be presented as news. At its best the press is a servant and guardian of institutions; at its worst it is a means by which a few exploit social disorganization to their own ends ... The press is no substitute for institutions. It is like the beam of a searchlight that moves restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another out of darkness into vision. Men cannot do the work of the world by this light alone. They cannot govern society by episodes, incidents, and eruptions. It is only when they work by a steady light of their own, that the press, when it is turned upon them, reveals a situation intelligible enough for popular decision."

(Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* [1922], p, 3-64.)

2.1.2. Reconstituting the Public – John Dewey (1859-1952)

"We have inherited ... local town-meeting practices and ideas. But we live and act and have our being in a continental national state. We are held together by non-political bonds, and the political forms are stretched and legal institutions patched in an *ad hoc* and improvised manner to do the work they have to do. Political structures fix the channels in which non-political, industrialized currents flow. Railways, travel and transportation, commerce, the mails, telegraph and telephone, newspapers, create enough similarity of ideas and sentiments to keep the thing going as a whole, for they create interaction and interdependence."

"The ties which hold men together in action are numerous, tough and subtle. But they are invisible and intangible. 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, seeking spasmodically for itself, but seizing and holding its shadow rather than its substance. Till the Great Society is converted into a Great Community, the Public will remain in eclipse. Communication can alone create a great community. Our Babel is not one of tongues but of signs and symbols without which shared experience is impossible."

(John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* [1927].)

2.1.3. "The Fault in Ourselves" – Edward R. Murrow (1908-1965)

"We can deny our heritage and our history, but we cannot escape responsibility for the result. There is no way for a citizen of a republic to abdicate his responsibilities. As a nation we have come into our full inheritance at a tender age. We proclaim ourselves, as indeed we are, the defenders of freedom, wherever it continues to exist in the world, but we cannot defend freedom abroad by deserting it at home. The actions of the junior Senator from Wisconsin have caused alarm and dismay amongst our allies abroad, and given considerable comfort to our enemies. And whose fault is that? Not really his. He didn't create this situation of fear; he merely exploited it – and rather successfully. Cassius was right. 'The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves'."

(From an episode of *See It Now* dedicated to the congressional hearings being conducted by Senator Joseph McCarthy, broadcast 9 March 1954; Edward R. Murrow, *In Search of Light: The Broadcasts of Edward R. Murrow, 1938-1961*, ed. E. Bliss, Jr. [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967], p. 248.)

2.2. WHAT WATERGATE HATH WROUGHT

2.2.1. *The Pentagon Papers* – Hannah Arendt (1889-1974)

"To the many genres in the art of lying developed in the past, we must now add two more recent varieties. There is, *first*, the apparently innocuous one of the public-relations managers in government who learned their trade from the inventiveness of Madison Avenue. Public relations is but a variety of advertising; hence it has its origin in the consumer society, with its inordinate appetite for goods to be distributed through a market economy ... The only limitation to what the public-relations man does comes when he discovers that the same people who perhaps can be 'manipulated' to buy a certain kind of soap cannot be manipulated – though, of course, they can be forced by terror – to 'buy' opinions and political views. Therefore the psychological premise of human manipulability has become one of the chief wares that are sold on the market of common and learned opinion ...

"The *second* new variety of the art of lying ... plays a more important role in *The Pentagon Papers* ... They are ... professional 'problem-solvers', and they were drawn into government from the universities and the various think tanks, some of them equipped with game theories and systems analyses, thus prepared, as they thought, to solve all the 'problems' of foreign policy ... The problem-solvers have been characterized as men of great self-confidence, who 'seem rarely to doubt their ability to prevail' ... [T]hey were not just intelligent, but prided themselves on being 'rational', and they were indeed to a rather frightening degree above 'sentimentality' and in love with 'theory', the world of sheer mental effort. They were eager to find formulas, preferably expressed in a pseudo-mathematical language, that would unify the most disparate phenomena with which reality presented them; that is, they were eager to discover *laws* by which to explain and predict political and historical facts as though they were as necessary, and thus as reliable, as the physicists one believed natural phenomena to be."

(Hannah Arendt, "Lying in Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers," in *Crises of the Republic* [Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1972], pp. 13-16.)

"That concealment, falsehood, and the role of the deliberate lie became the chief issues of *The Pentagon Papers*, rather than illusion, error, miscalculation, and the like, is mainly due to the strange fact that the mistaken decisions and lying statements consistently violated the astoundingly accurate factual reports of the intelligence community ... The crucial point here is not merely that the policy of lying was hardly ever aimed at the enemy (this is one of the reasons why the papers do not reveal any military secrets that could fall under the Espionage Act), but was chiefly, if not exclusively, for domestic consumption, for propaganda at home, and especially

for the purposes of deceiving Congress ... What *The Pentagon Papers* report is the haunting fear of the impact of defeat, not on the welfare of the nation, but 'on the *reputation* of the United States and its President' ..."

(Hannah Arendt, "Lying in Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers," pp. 17-18.)

2.2.2. The Moral Obligation of Journalists – Henry Fairlie (1924-1990)

"The real duty of the political journalist is to supply *moral information* from a coherent intellectual position: to supply it to the politicians on the one hand, and to the voters on the other." What Henry Fairlie means by "moral information" involves, in large part, a passionate belief in the inherent nobility of the political vocation, "the conviction that the political world is inherently good." And then, on the basis of that passionate conviction, it is the preparedness of the journalist to commit him or herself, to stake out a view of the world and measure this or that politician against it. The opposite of this understanding of the journalistic vocation – "to supply moral information from a coherent intellectual position" – is a kind of debased and mutually debasing cynicism. This cynicism is predicated on every journalist's fear that "he might be caught in believing in something or in somebody." The cynical, economically-infused view of public life "encourages the elevation of every other realm of life above that of politics, so that we are encouraged to believe that no one is more base than the politician, and that it is only from mundane motives that free men go to the polls." But, writes Fairlie:

"We have no other defense now against the dominance of the economic realm than the determination of the political world to assert itself. The task of the political journalist - and of the newspapers or television companies which employ him - is to strengthen that assertion. He may criticize an individual politician; he has no right to diminish the political function."

(Henry Fairlie, "Press Against Politics" [1976], in *Bite the Hand That Feeds You: Essays and Provocations*, ed. Jeremy McCarter [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009], pp. 273-74.)

And yet, in 1976, Fairlie laments, "the press and television had made it seem that no candidate ever advocated anything for any other reason than that it would win him votes." In perhaps the best description of post-Watergate press culture that I know, Fairlie writes:

"The absence of moral information from [the 'best and brightest' of the journalists] is not only alarming, it is degrading. There comes no word from them to suggest that democracy is the accumulation of the moral aspirations and decisions of vexed but hopeful individuals, and that their task is to reinforce the process with their own intellectual commitment. Everything about an election is reduced by them to so miserly an estimate of human motives that there can be no sense of the sheer hopefulness of a free people when they vote ..."

(Henry Fairlie, "Press Against Politics" [1976], pp. 273-74.)

It is once this newly deranged journalism – separated from identifiable ends, and ungoverned by moral constraints apart from, say, professional codes of conduct or the scrutiny afforded by regulatory and self-regulatory bodies – congeals around institutional power as a form of counter-power, that "the media" is born. Henry Fairlie points to the historical emergence of something new – "not just an extension of something that went before" – in the mid-1970s. Since Watergate, he writes, Washington is "less a political city and more a media city." Hence, "the primary activity of Washington is no longer the government of the country through its political institutions; it is now the sustaining of the illusion of government through the media and in obedience to the media's needs and demands."

2.2.3. *Network* (1976)

"You're television incarnate, Diana: indifferent to suffering; insensitive to joy. All of life is reduced to the common rubble of banality. War, murder, death - all the same to you as bottle of beer. And the daily business of life is a corrupt comedy. You even shatter the sensations of time and space into split seconds, instant replays. You're madness, Diana. Virulent madness. And everything you touch dies with you."

(Max Schumacher [William Holden] to Diana Christensen [Faye Dunaway], in *Network* [screenplay by Paddy Chayefsky; directed by Sidney Lumet; 1976].)